



Women's Empowerment as a Pillar of Sustainable Ecotourism Development in Belumbang Village, Tabanan, Bali

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable ecotourism integrates environmental, social, and economic aspects to encourage local development. However, women's participation in this sector is still limited due to socio-cultural and institutional barriers. This research aims to analyze the role of women in ecotourism in Belumbang Village, identify the challenges they face, and formulate strategies to empower them. The method employed was a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and descriptive analysis, supported by a survey of 100 female respondents. The study's results indicate that women play an active role in the informal ecotourism sector; however, their participation remains minimal in strategic decision-making. Community-based empowerment strategies that include skills training, gender-inclusive policies, and access to capital are recommended to increase women's participation and support the achievement of sustainable development goals.

INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism has evolved as a form of alternative tourism that aims not only to increase tourist visits but also to strike a balance between environmental conservation, local community empowerment, and the protection of the cultural values inherent in a region. According to Fennell (2020), ecotourism is a form of travel to natural areas that is conducted in an environmentally responsible manner, providing socio-economic benefits to the local community. In the context of village development, ecotourism is viewed as a strategic approach to integrating environmental conservation and regional economic development, thereby enhancing the social capacity of the community. Belumbang Village, located in Kerambitan District, Tabanan Regency, Bali, is an area with extraordinary eco-tourism potential, featuring an agricultural landscape that is maintained with mountain views that can be seen in the morning and evening, as well as the existence of fortune tellers (Jro Dasaran) and Jro Balian Taksu, Purification/Melukat, Yoga, which is a local culture as a healing tourism attraction, as well as the river as a cliff and fishing tourism in the river. However, the social reality on the ground indicates that women's participation in the ecotourism sector remains marginal. Their involvement is largely limited to domestic activities or the informal sector, such as food providers, artisans, or local guides, while access to strategic decision-making positions remains very low. This inequality is not only caused by gender-biased institutional structures but also by patriarchal socio-cultural constructions that are still strong in Balinese society (Cole, 2008). In fact, previous research has demonstrated that women play a crucial role in promoting tourism sustainability through effective resource management, preservation of traditional values, and the development of community-based economic innovations (Scheyvens, 2000; UN Women, 2019). When women are empowered and given participatory space in the tourism sector, they are not only able to increase family income but also strengthen social structures and expand collaborative networks at the local level.

Furthermore, the inequality in women's participation in sustainable ecotourism highlights a gap between the global vision of sustainable development and its actual implementation at the local level. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda explicitly emphasizes the importance of gender equality (SDG 5) and decent work and inclusive economic growth (SDG 8) as part of the global strategy towards sustainable and inclusive development (United Nations, 2015). However, in the context of tourism village development in Bali, attention to the gender dimension is often marginalized in village policy and program practices. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity to implement research-based interventions that can enhance women's capacity in ecotourism development, ultimately supporting the achievement of equitable development goals. This research is essential for filling gaps in the academic literature and development practices, particularly in relation to women's empowerment within the context of village ecotourism in Bali, which remains relatively underdeveloped. Most previous research has focused more on conservation aspects or the economic impact of ecotourism without exploring in depth the socio-cultural aspects and the strategic role of women in community-

based development. Therefore, this article aims to comprehensively analyze the role of women in ecotourism activities in Belumbang Village, identify the various structural and cultural obstacles they face, and formulate an empowerment strategy based on local potential, cultural values, and principles of social inclusion. Using a participatory qualitative approach, this study aims to make a significant contribution to the development of sustainable ecotourism models that promote gender justice and can be replicated in other tourism villages in Indonesia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research is grounded in several key theories that are relevant to examining the role of women in sustainable ecotourism development. First, the theory of women's empowerment, as put forward by Kabeer (1999), serves as the basis for understanding the dimension of empowerment as a dynamic process that encompasses three main components: access to resources, the ability to make strategic decisions (agency), and the achievement of meaningful outcomes (achievements). These three components are interrelated in shaping women's power to take control of their lives and actively participate in socio-economic development. In the context of ecotourism, women's empowerment encompasses not only increasing skills and income but also involvement in decision-making and leadership in community-based activities.

Second, the theory of sustainable development introduced by Bramwell and Lane (1993) emphasizes the importance of balancing economic, social, and environmental dimensions in any development initiative. Sustainable development cannot be achieved without the active participation of all elements of society, including women, in the planning and implementation process of the program. In the development of ecotourism, sustainability can only be achieved if tourism activities do not harm the environment, support the local economy's sustainability, and strengthen the community's social structure. Therefore, integrating gender perspectives into ecotourism planning is essential so that social justice and ecological sustainability can coexist.

Third, the ecofeminist approach offers a critical perspective on the relationship between women and nature, underscoring the interconnection between gender inequality and environmental exploitation. Ecofeminism views women as essential agents in the conservation and management of natural resources due to their historical and cultural connection to nature (Cole, 2007; Shiva, 1989). In an agrarian society like Bali, women possess in-depth local knowledge of agricultural practices, water conservation, and the sustainable use of resources. However, this knowledge is often not formally recognized in decision-making systems. Thus, the approach of ecofeminism emphasizes the importance of acknowledging women's experiences, values, and contributions to environmental management, as well as the need to challenge patriarchal social structures. Previous literature has shown that women have a significant contribution to the development of community-based ecotourism. Bhattarai and Conway (2010) found, in their study in Nepal, that women's involvement in small businesses, such as local inns, traditional culinary arts, and handicrafts,

contributes to increased family income and the preservation of local culture. Similar findings were also reported by Cole (2008) in his research in eastern Indonesia, which showed that women play a crucial role in maintaining cultural values and serving as a link between tourists and local communities. However, this participation is often not accompanied by access to decision-making or formal leadership, so the role of women in ecotourism is still considered secondary. Thus, this literature review demonstrates that, despite the recognition of women's contributions to ecotourism, significant gaps remain in terms of structural empowerment and formal recognition. Therefore, an approach that combines empowerment theory, sustainable development, and ecofeminism is necessary to develop a model of women's empowerment that enhances women's position as key actors in the sustainable development of ecotourism.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the roles, barriers, and strategies involved in empowering women for sustainable ecotourism development at the community level. This approach was chosen because it is able to reveal social phenomena contextually and exploratively in a complex socio-cultural environment, such as in Belumbang Village, Kerambitan District, and Tabanan Regency. The qualitative method also enables researchers to capture the subjective meanings held by participants, particularly women involved in ecotourism activities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research location was chosen purposively because Belumbang Village has strong characteristics in nature- and culture-based ecotourism, as well as the involvement of women in the sector, which is interesting to study academically. Data collection was conducted through three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and surveys. Interviews were conducted with 30 key informants, comprising women ecotourism actors, managers of tourism awareness groups (Pokdarwis), traditional leaders, and village officials involved in tourism development policies. This technique is used to explore the narratives, experiences, perceptions, and critical views of informants regarding their roles in ecotourism, the barriers they face, and the empowerment opportunities available. The participatory observation was carried out during the field data collection process, where the researcher was involved in the daily activities of the community, such as MSME training, tourism subak activities, and interaction between local women and tourists. This technique is useful for gaining an understanding of social context and dynamics that cannot always be captured through interviews (Spradley, 1980).

To strengthen the qualitative data, a survey was conducted among 100 female respondents, selected using purposive sampling techniques based on their involvement in ecotourism activities. This survey aims to determine the general perception of empowerment, the type of participation undertaken, and the obstacles encountered, as well as to gather quantitative descriptive data to support the findings. The respondents' criteria included being between 18 and

60 years of age, residing in Belumbang Village, and being active or having been involved in ecotourism activities within the last two years.

Data analysis was conducted using the thematic analysis method, as formulated by Braun and Clarke (2006). This analysis process consists of six main stages: (1) familiarization of the data through repeated reading and transcription of interview results, (2) the initial coding process by identifying units of significance, (3) theme search by grouping similar codes, (4) review of the theme to ensure consistency and suitability of the data, (5) definition and naming of themes to form a coherent narrative, and (6) the writing of systematic reports on the results of the findings. The validity of the data is maintained through triangulation techniques of sources and methods, discussions between researchers, and confirmation from informants (member check). This entire process is carried out to ensure that the interpretation of research results has good accuracy, transferability, and dependability according to qualitative research standards (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Women's Participation in Ecotourism

The results of a survey of 100 female respondents in Belumbang Village indicate that the level of women's participation in ecotourism remains predominantly in the operational and informal sectors. As many as 35% of respondents stated that they feel pretty involved in ecotourism activities, especially in the field of services and production. The activities most involved women were traditional food processing (30%) and local handicraft production (25%), while the remainder were spread across other activities, such as local guiding and home-based accommodation (Figure 1).

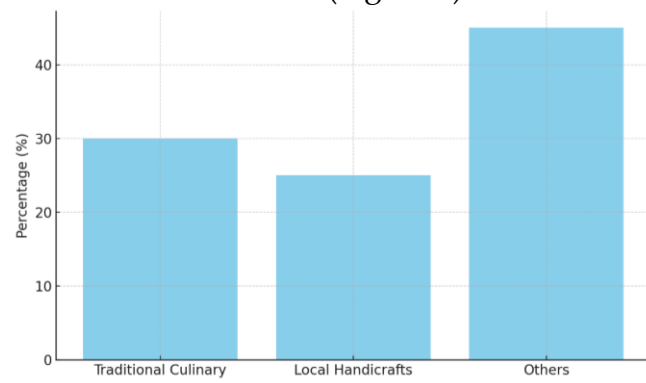


Figure 1. Distribution of Women's Roles in Ecotourism

However, women's involvement in strategic positions and decision-making is still very low. Only 20% of respondents have experience in decision-making, both at the level of tourism awareness groups (Pokdarwis) and in village deliberations related to tourism development. In contrast, 80% of respondents admitted that they had never been involved in the formal planning process (Figure 2). These findings align with Kabeer's (1999) empowerment theory, which posits that access to resources does not necessarily translate into the ability to influence policy directions or strategic decisions.

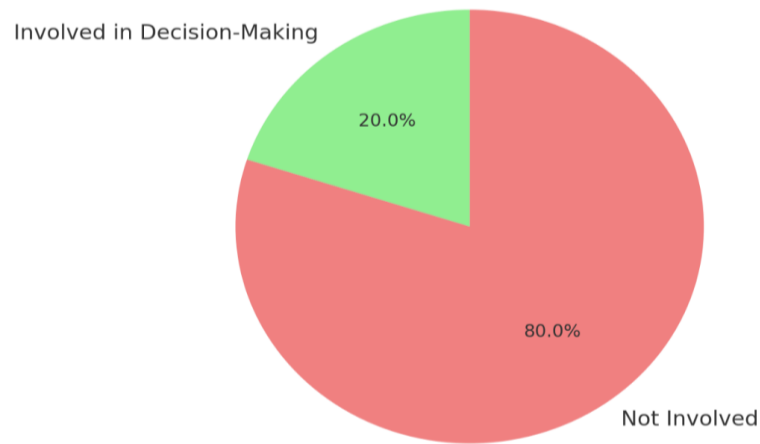


Figure 2. Women's Involvement in Decision-Making

Barriers to Women's Participation

The low representation of women in strategic positions within ecotourism development is attributed to several structural and cultural barriers. Based on the results of interviews and surveys, the main factors that hinder women's participation include limited access to business capital (25%), low level of formal education (20%), the dominance of patriarchal social norms that limit women's space for movement (15%), and lack of supportive policies that favor gender equality (10%) (Figure 3).

These barriers reinforce the findings of Cole (2008), which highlights the importance of socio-cultural contexts in assessing women's capacity to be involved in tourism development.

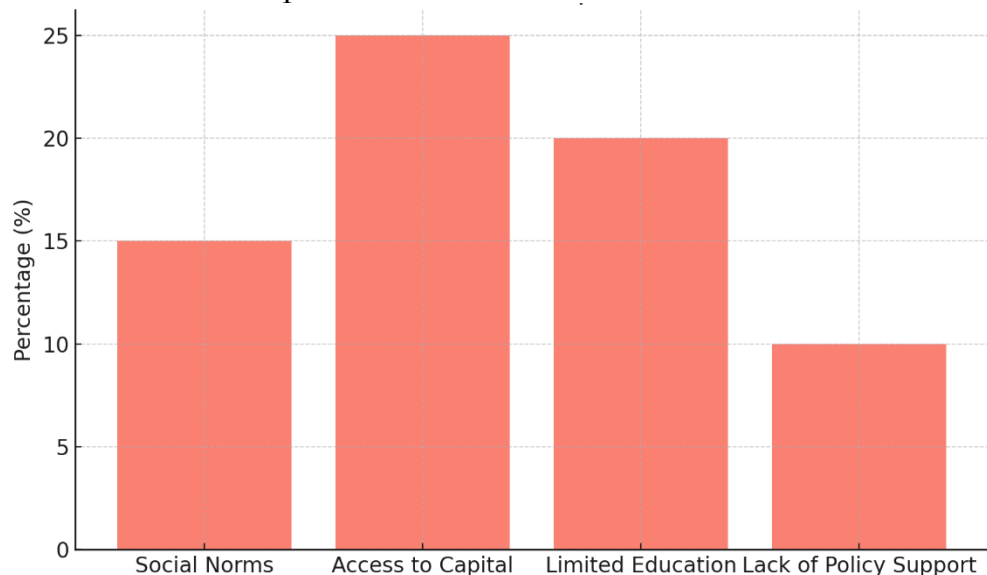


Figure 3. Barriers to Women's Participation in Ecotourism

In addition, the lack of business management training and digital skills is also an obstacle that is often mentioned by respondents in in-depth interviews. This highlights the importance of empowerment programs that encompass not

only technical aspects but also address structural issues, such as educational improvement and gender-based policy reform.

The Positive Impact of Women's Empowerment

Although women's formal participation in decision-making remains limited, their involvement in ecotourism activities has had a profoundly positive impact on the lives of people. In the economic dimension, the majority of respondents stated that participation in ecotourism businesses has increased household income and opened up new business opportunities based on local potential. This reinforces Scheyvens' (2000) argument that women's participation in community tourism can promote sustainable economic empowerment.

From a social perspective, women experience increased self-confidence, enhanced social status within families and communities, and a greater collective awareness of the importance of gender equality. Some informants mentioned that they are now more active in village forums and have begun to voice the needs and interests of women in public activities. Ecologically, women's involvement also has a positive impact on environmental conservation, as they are involved in natural resource conservation activities such as reforestation, waste management, and ecological education to tourists. Women play a crucial role in maintaining the continuity between local cultural values and environmental conservation principles, which are at the heart of the ecotourism concept (Fennell, 2020; UNWTO, 2002).

Constructing Empowerment: Between Access and Women's Agents

The findings of this study support the theoretical framework of women's empowerment proposed by Kabeer (1999), which views empowerment not only as access to resources but also as the agency dimension, or the ability to make strategic choices that impact women's lives directly. Most respondents in the study indicated that, although they already have access to economic resources such as raw materials, technical training, or MSME networks, they do not yet have the power to fully participate in decision-making structures. This shows that symbolic or administrative empowerment does not guarantee the realization of substantive or transformative empowerment (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). Figure 4 illustrates the comparison between access and agency experienced by female respondents.

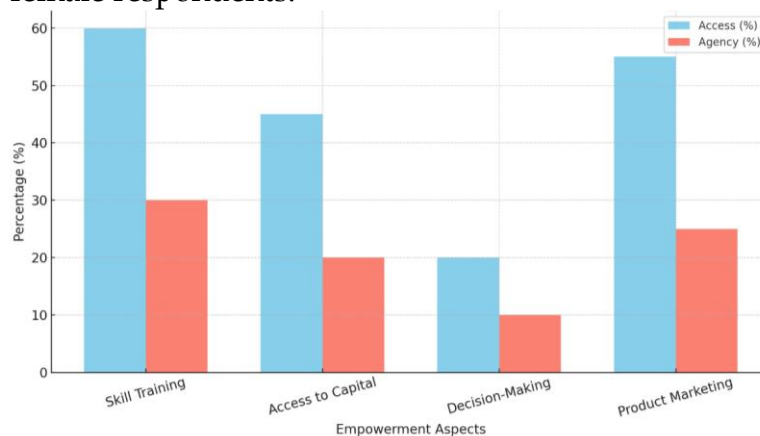


Figure 4. Comparison to Access and Agency in Women Empowerment

Figure 4 illustrates a significant gap between access to empowerment programs and women's ability to utilize them strategically. This condition indicates the need for a more participatory and holistic approach to designing ecotourism-based empowerment programs.

Women as Strategic Agents in Ecotourism

Despite being hit by social barriers such as patriarchal cultural norms, educational limitations, and structural inequality, women in Belumbang Village still show significant contributions to the local ecotourism ecosystem. Their role in local food processing, handicraft production, and homestay management demonstrates that women are important actors in driving locally based economies (Bhattarai & Conway, 2010). Their existence as informal economic actors provide a flexible adaptation space and maintains the sustainability of environmentally friendly practices.

Conceptually, this aligns with the ecofeminist approach, which recognizes the historical and ecological role of women in caring for nature and communities (Shiva, 1989; Cole, 2007). Women not only carry out productive functions but also nurture the cultural and spiritual values inherent in the local ecological landscape. Therefore, strengthening the position of women in ecotourism is not just an economic empowerment agenda but an integral cultural and environmental strategy.

Gender Inclusive Policies as a Catalyst for Empowerment

One of the essential findings of this study is the need for policy interventions that support systemic gender inclusion in village ecotourism management. Without the support of partisan regulations and institutions, women's roles will continue to be marginalized in the formal realm. Village policies, Pokdarwis organizational structures, and training organized by local governments or donor agencies must explicitly include gender equality indicators.

Support for community-based programs, such as women's business management training, digital literacy counseling, and access to microfinance institutions, can enhance women's ability to operate sustainable tourism-oriented businesses. According to Scheyvens (2000), a successful empowerment model provides women with the space to determine the direction of their self-development and community.

Local-Global Synergy to Achieve the SDGs

Women's involvement in ecotourism not only impacts the local context but also contributes directly to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). Therefore, village development planning and empowerment programs need to be integrated with the SDGs framework in a flexible and context-specific manner.

Bali, as a world-class tourist destination, has an excellent opportunity to develop community-based ecotourism as a gender-inclusive model of sustainable development. Belumbang Village, with its unique ecological and social characteristics, can serve as an example of best practice if women's

empowerment programs are implemented consistently, systematically, and grounded in local values.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that women's involvement in ecotourism development in Belumbang Village, Kerambitan District, Tabanan Regency, remains predominantly informal, primarily in the domestic operational sector. Women play a large role in activities such as local culinary processing, handicraft production, and small-scale accommodation services. Despite their tangible contributions to supporting local economies and preserving cultural values, women's access to strategic decision-making spaces remains very limited. Only a small fraction has the capacity to directly influence the direction of ecotourism policy or program planning. This inequality is reinforced by structural barriers such as the dominance of patriarchal social norms, limited access to education and training, and the lack of regulatory support that is responsive to gender issues.

These findings support the empowerment theory proposed by Kabeer (1999), which suggests that empowerment is not merely providing access to resources, but must also be accompanied by enhancing women's ability to make strategic choices (agency) that impact their lives. In addition, the ecofeminism approach also strengthens the analysis that women have a close relationship with nature and community sustainability so they have great potential as agents of change in sustainable ecotourism development.

To increase the strategic role of women in ecotourism development and support the achievement of inclusive sustainable development, comprehensive and sustainable interventions are needed. The recommendations of this study are formulated as follows:

- a. **Development of Local-Based Skills and Entrepreneurship Training.** It is essential to develop training programs that cater to the local needs and potential of women in the village. The training not only covers technical skills such as local product processing, micro-business management, and digital marketing but also strengthens the leadership and negotiation aspects. This community-based training program will boost women's capacity not only to become business actors but also to lead village ecotourism activities.
- b. **Strengthening Gender-Inclusive Regulations and Institutional Structures.** Local and village governments need to develop policies and regulations that explicitly support women's participation in ecotourism institutions such as Pokdarwis. One of the forms is the allocation of quotas for women's leadership in organizational structures, as well as the implementation of gender mainstreaming in the planning and evaluation of village programs. Additionally, it is essential to develop gender performance indicators for sustainable tourism development programs.
- c. **Provision of Access to Capital and Market Networks.** Many women have creative business ideas, but they are often hindered by limited capital and restricted market access. Therefore, it is essential to develop inclusive

financing schemes, such as women's cooperatives and revolving fund programs, as well as partnerships with microfinance institutions and local marketplaces. Access to market networks, both digital and conventional, also needs to be expanded through promotional training, local product branding, and active participation in creative economy exhibitions.

All of the above steps are expected to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment, as well as SDG 8 on inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Through strengthening women's capacity and mainstreaming gender in ecotourism management, villages like Belumbang are not only able to improve the quality of life of their citizens but also maintain the preservation of natural resources and local culture, which are the main foundation of ecotourism itself.

FURTHER STUDY

This research has geographical limitations, as it was conducted in only one village and employed an exploratory qualitative approach, which limits the generalizability of the results. Therefore, further research is recommended to use a quantitative approach or mixed methods to measure the relationship between variables of women's empowerment more objectively. Comparative studies between villages with different socio-cultural characteristics are also crucial for developing a model of women's empowerment that is more applicable and contextual and can support the formulation of gender-inclusive ecotourism development policies at a broader level.

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