

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN RURAL TOURISM MANAGEMENT IN CENTRAL MEXICO

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to analyze the development of abilities and agency in women through rural tourism, considering the construct of empowerment as theoretical perspective, through a qualitative approach, with tools derived from the ethnographic method. This study seeks to produce knowledge about the experiences of women in rural tourism and their contribution to development in their communities. The results expose transformation processes that women have experienced in each of the dimensions of empowerment, based on their participation in rural tourism projects, where there is evidence that despite these processes being individual, there are important repercussions at the collective level.

Keywords: community development, rural tourism enterprises, gender, rural women.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of empowerment began to be used between 1960 and 1970, connected to feminist movements of the Global South. Paulo Freire was one of its harbingers (1970), associating it with consciousness and collective liberation. Then, Rowlands (1995) and Kabeer (1999) defined empowerment as the ability to make decisions in self-management, beyond access to resources. At the IV World Conference on Women in Beijing (ONU, 1995), the suggestion was made that “women’s empowerment and their full participation in equal conditions, in all spheres of society, is fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace...” (ONU, 1995, p.3). The Millennium Development Goals (ONU, 2000) suggest empowerment as a key goal for development; meanwhile, the Agenda 2030 (ONU, 2015), specifically Sustainable Development Goal 5, suggests “achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls”.

In Latin America, it has acquired a feminist, territorial, intercultural and community nature, going from being a driving force for collective awareness and resistance, to a strategic element for the formulation of public policies, in an environment of tensions, progress and setbacks, given the persistence of gender violences and precarious economies. In Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Mexico, normative frameworks have been adopted in favor of gender parity. The Convention on the elimination of all the forms of discrimination against women (GSA, 1998) and the Beijing Action platform (ONU, 1995),

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were key for these advances. In Mexico, the General Law of Women's Access to a Life Free of Violence (*Ley General de Acceso a las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencia*, CDHCU, 2007), recognized violence as a form of structural dominance; however, its implementation has been limited by institutional weakness, impunity, and lack of resources allotted for this (Pérez, 2021). The feminization of poverty, disproportionate load of unpaid work, and gender salary gaps persist, according to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL, 2021). Empowerment must also be understood from the perspective of social and community struggles; community feminism in Bolivia, Guatemala and Mexico has proposed transformations that not only question the patriarchy, but also colonialism and extractivism.

The factors linked with the empowerment of women at the individual level (García *et al.*, 2022) relate to their access to economic resources, savings capacity, freedom of movement, certainty in decision making, acquisition of patrimony, and change of cultural domination patterns. For García *et al.* (2022), the family environment plays a decisive role in the process of feminine empowerment, since patriarchal and gender inequality relationships are derived or reproduced in the household, while in the work environment, it is possible to replicate or exceed these limitations. Vázquez (2024) states that work is the central axis of gender inequality. This is why when women perform in several spheres such as the social or the cultural, they can strengthen their identity, entering a true relationship of social strength, based on strategies for empowerment.

According to the UN (2019), women represent between 60 and 70% of the work force in the tourism sector. Despite this statistical representation, the positions occupied are frequently of lower rank and pay (Montiel, 1998). As consequence, one of the main challenges in rural tourism is the gender pay gap, which is between 10 and 15% less than their male counterparts (Rodríguez and Osuna, 2015; Alonso, 2019). This has been described by Heredia *et al.* (2003), as the "crystal ceiling" which limits the progress of women.

Several initiatives have been implemented to create more equitable environments, increase the participation of women in leadership roles, and improve their access to opportunities for training and professional development (ONU, 2019), which have had a positive and visible impact on the social position of women in both urban and rural environments, providing a platform to influence political and community decisions. An example of this is the comparison between the way of life of a woman born in the mid-20th century and one born at the beginning of the 21st century. If access to education, capacity for decision in terms of personal relationships, work opportunities, and social participation are compared, important advances can be seen. However, there is still work ahead, especially in rural environments. The UN (2019) identifies that women in rural zones have less access to the

necessary resources to capitalize the opportunities of the tourism sector, in addition to certain patriarchal structures, which still predominate regarding the participation of women in community and business decisions.

According to Roberts and Hall (2001), rural tourism is an alternative to diversify rural economies, representing an area of opportunity to overcome the cultural, psychological, social, political and economic limitations imposed by the dominating structures, as well as the access to opportunities for dignified work, participation in collective decision making, development of abilities and skills for empowerment, and connection with other women in learning and professionalization networks, among others.

Rural tourism impacts traditional family structures and encourages women to perform a more active role in social interactions, community organization and tourism. Rural women have experienced a moment of great transformations in recent years (Garrido, 2015), going from being the ones in charge of the home and supporting agricultural production and caretaking, to having a more relevant role in productive activities, although many times responding to doubling of the workday, which is not always justly remunerated. The incorporation of women in productive sectors, in many cases, can also be the result of negative effects in economies, such as migration, ageing, and feminization of the farmland.

Two positions regarding the role of rural women in tourism stand out: i) those that are in favor of positive impacts of women's participation in touristic activity directed towards equity, and ii) those that state that the roles that women perform in tourism further accentuate gender subordination (Oseguera and Sánchez, 2024). Likewise, the ambivalent role of rural tourism, which can strengthen abilities, generate benefits and connect networks, has been documented (Vujko *et al.*, 2024), but it can also accentuate exclusion and inequalities. The challenge lies in promoting these activities from a gender perspective that places the discussions of the power relationships between men and women in the center (Bandrés, 2024). Tourism in the rural space must drive an agenda for gender equality (Barrientos *et al.*, 2020), which allows female voices to be heard and integrated into planning and management of rural tourism (Galán and Fuller, 2015).

This study attempts to generate basic knowledge about the processes of empowerment of rural women through tourism, considering the particularities of community-based rural tourism. In this context, women carry out a fundamental role as providers of tourism services, contributing to the local economy and to the development of the territories. However, it is necessary to analyze whether their incursion into touristic activity has a favorable impact in their process of empowerment and the positive change of their material conditions of existence.

The Theory of Empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999) is used as foundation, considering the ideological perspectives about the concept of power and its representations in women's capacity for agency and in the processes of community-based rural tourism management. The text stems from a theoretical discussion, where ideological perspectives on the concept of power are addressed, as well as the historical evolution of feminine empowerment. Then, the qualitative methodological design and the tools derived from the ethnographic method are presented. The results are developed referring to each of the dimensions of empowerment exposed in the theoretical section. In the discussion, the findings reported by previous studies are debated, recapitulating each of the dimensions of empowerment, as well as some suggested actions, to generate the circumstances that strengthen the abilities of agency of rural women involved in tourism projects. Finally, the conclusions highlight the impact of feminine empowerment individually and its collective repercussions, as well as the importance of inclusive innovation in the projects of rural community tourism. The objective of the article was to identify the impact of tourism in empowerment processes of rural women in the long term, considering the personal dimension of the individual and collective growth, through organizational development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory of empowerment emerges as a critical perspective that proposes analyzing the sense of power at the individual, organizational and collective level (Zimmerman, 1995), in its psychological, social, political, economic and cultural dimensions (Scheyvens, 1999), which are fundamental to bring to light the impacts of women's participation in the management of community tourism.

Examining empowerment from the psychological perspective is decisive to understand the quality of the work environment (Abel and Hand, 2018). Psychological empowerment refers to the process through which individuals increase their self-esteem and control over their lives (Mansperger, 1992; Boissevain, 1996). Some characteristics of psychological empowerment are the sense of self-determination, personal competence, meaning, and impact, which reflect the proactive orientation of an individual towards their work role and their personal sense in the workspace (Spreitzer, 1995).

The social dimension of empowerment implies interaction and collaboration between local actors, to perform actions directed towards collective transformation (Taylor, 2000; Cole, 2006), which creates spaces for inclusion and community development (Dolezal and Novelli, 2022). Political empowerment considers the management of territorial goods, the capacity for agency and the goals reached, contemplating individual and structural change (Kabeer, 1999).

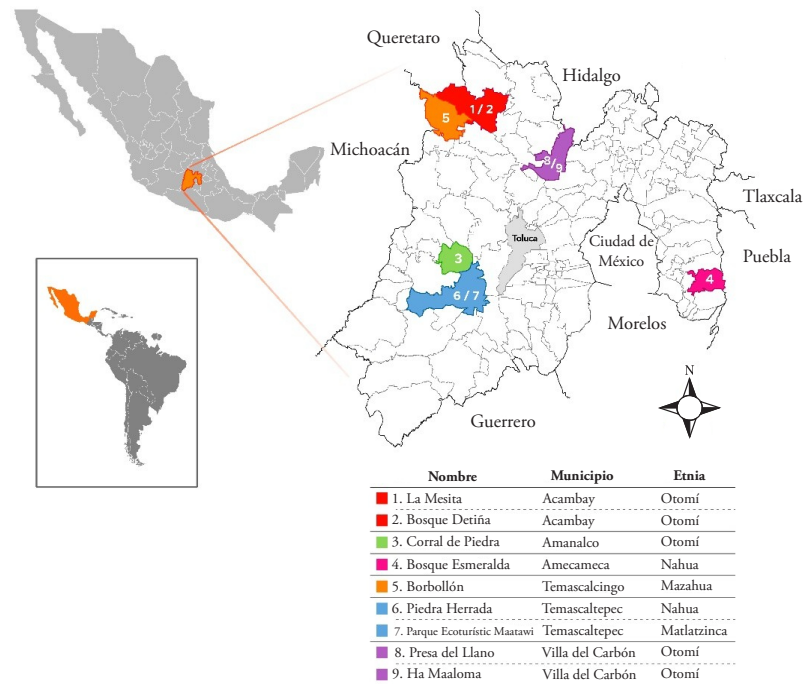
Economic empowerment implies guaranteeing opportunities for employment, controlling and benefiting from resources, managing their time, improving their economic situation and their welfare (Robinson *et al.*, 2019).

Cultural empowerment implies the promotion, preservation, and valuation of customs, practices and traditional knowhow, recognizing the importance of cultural identity and allowing women to be guardians of their culture and sharing their artisanal and culinary skills, knowledge about herbal medicine, traditional agricultural practices, as well as oral narratives of their ethnic worldviews, through which they reflect their identity, at the same time that they complement their income, strengthening their sense of belonging (Nussbaum, 2000).

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative, exploratory approach, based on tools from the ethnographic method. The qualitative approach allowed deeply addressing experiences of women's empowerment in rural tourism, as well as understanding their impact in rural communities. The ethnographic method gives a holistic perspective, focusing on participant observation. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, which allowed capturing the voices and perspectives of women involved in rural tourism. Lastly, data analysis was carried out inductively, identifying emerging themes and patterns from the transcriptions of interviews and the data gathered, integrating the results in each of the dimensions of empowerment indicated by the theory (Zimmerman, 2000).

The qualitative approach allowed exploring the meanings and perceptions of women regarding their participation in rural tourism, as well as understanding the factors that promote or limit their empowerment. Through semi-structured interviews, data were gathered that allowed apprehending the complexity of rural women's experiences. The qualitative approach also allowed developing a critical view of the power structures present in rural communities, identifying possible factors that strengthen or limit women's empowerment in rural tourism. The women interviewed are employees in ecotourism centers located in rural zones of municipalities of Estado de México, where one of the representative ethnic groups lives (Otomí, Tlahuica, Nahuatl, Mazahua, Matlatzinca) and who received financing for the development of infrastructure (González-Domínguez *et al.*, 2018) for rural tourism (Figure 1). The ecotourism centers considered as study zone are community rural tourism enterprises that belong to *ejido* or communal agrarian nuclei and report to the community Assembly, offer lodging services, food, recreational activities, and environmental, gastronomic or cultural experiences and workshops. Some of the ecotourism centers such as Bosque Esmeralda, Presa del Llano and Corral de Piedra and Matawi,



Source: prepared by the authors, based on INEGI (2020).

Figure 1. Location of the enterprises studied.

have constant demand during weekends and high season, whether during holidays, firefly or monarch butterfly seasons, and they receive national and international visitors. Meanwhile, Borbollón, Ha Maloma, Bosque de Tiña and La Mesita, do it more sporadically, during holiday season, some weekends, and for programmed events, and their demand is rather local.

A total of 18 women were interviewed, with ages that ranged between 24 and 68 years, inhabitants of rural communities who participate as service providers in community rural tourism enterprises and occupy various strategic positions that allow them to be in contact with tourists, with experience of minimum three years in the current position. Interviews were carried out with two women park managers, a sales manager, an administrator, three guides, two cooks, three workshop facilitators, three artisans, and two cleaning managers, in the period spanning from June 2023 and June 2024. The women interviewed who work directly in community enterprises are the ones who occupy the positions of park managers, administrators, sales managers, cook, waitresses, or cleaning managers; meanwhile, those who collaborate indirectly are the artisans, guides, and workshop facilitators.

The sampling by convenience technique was used (Hernández *et al.*, 2014), selecting the interview respondents for their willingness to participate, for participating

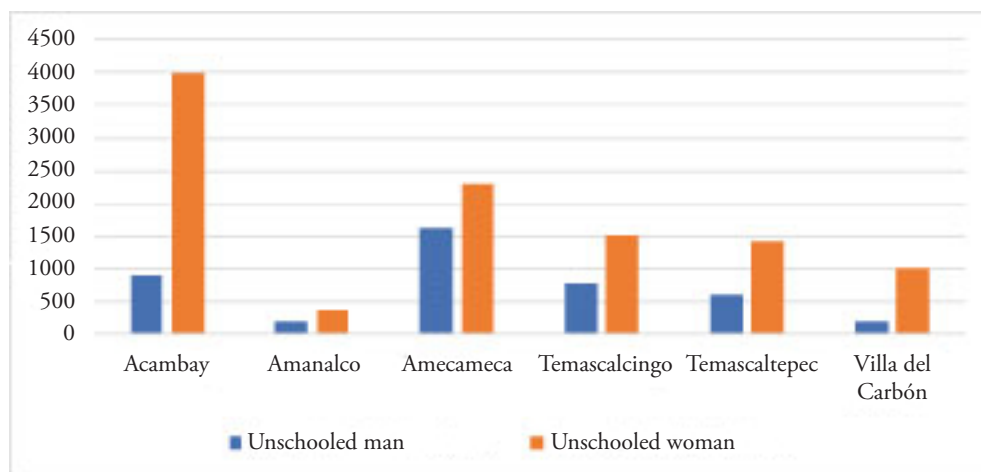
in key positions within the enterprises, and for the confidence to share their professional and life experience, under the gender approach. The semi-structured interview (Tonon, 2009), whose benefits are flexibility, adaptation and depth of information, included the following sections: i) general data, ii) life history, iii) participation in the enterprise, and iv) questions related with empowerment in its psychological, social, political, economic, cultural and environmental dimension.

RESULTS

Next, the findings related to the dimensions of empowerment are presented.

Psychological dimension

To understand women's role in rural tourism, it is necessary to mention some of the indicators of the Gender Atlas of Estado de México, which gives a general perspective of the situation of women. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI, 2020) in this state, there are 16,992,418 residents, of which 51.4% are women. Considering the indicator of education (Figure 2), it is observed that in the municipalities where the enterprises studied are found, the number of women without access to education is higher, revealing a persistent structural inequality in rural contexts, since the numbers of unschooled women range between 95% and 400% more than men who did not have access to education. This can be related to factors such as traditional gender roles that prioritize domestic work, marriages and early pregnancies that interrupt schooling, as well as the lack of local policies that promote the educational permanence of girls and teenagers.



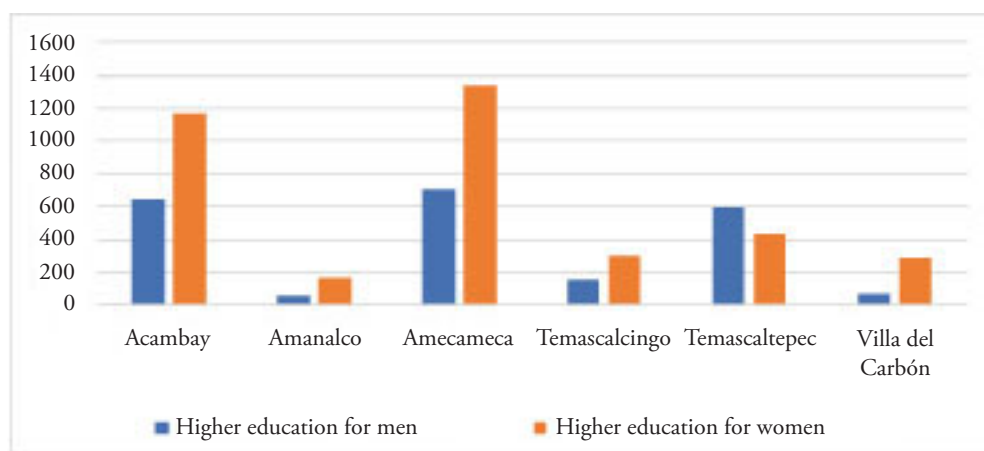
Source: Atlas de Género del Estado de México, 2023.

Figure 2. Men and women without schooling.

Despite this initial lag, the data from the Gender Atlas of Estado de México show that the number of women who reach the higher level of education (Figure 3), is higher in most of the municipalities analyzed. The comparison between the high desertion in the basic levels and reaching higher education denotes the process of empowerment that some women currently experience, as they deciding to continue with education at the higher level; however, this empowerment process is not automatic, as it depends on the existence of support networks, on their family context, access to resources, and self-determination, among other factors. However, the economically active population of the female gender is currently higher than that of the male gender, despite having less access to education. From the gender perspective of feminine empowerment (Rappaport, 1984; Scheyvens, 1999), being actively employed is not automatically equivalent to being empowered (Figure 4).

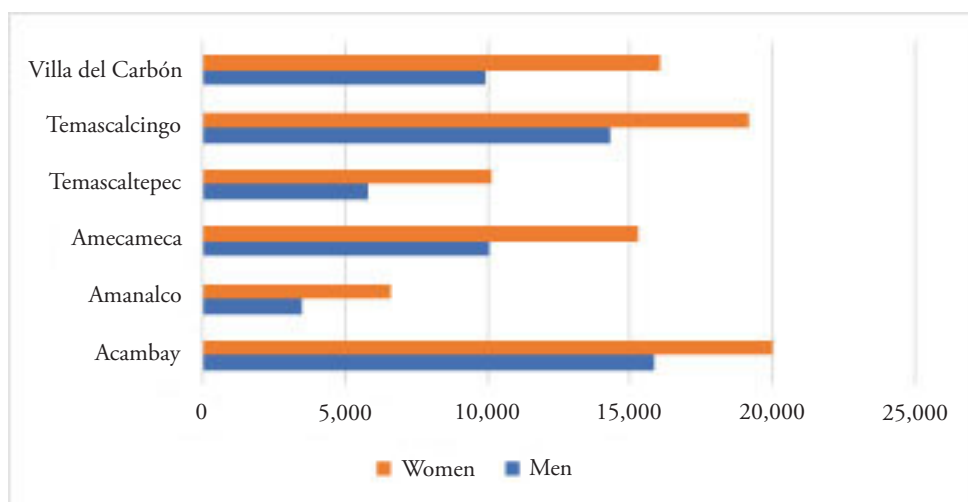
Based on the data exposed, it is possible to appreciate that women have had great progress in the educational and labor sphere in Estado de México; this is also reflected in the rural environment, which denotes that in the psychological sphere, in light of the dimensions of empowerment, there is greater self-confidence in women of the generations that are now 25 to 50 years old, who have complemented household tasks and are now entrepreneurs, professionals, and many are heads of household.

When it comes to their participation in the rural tourism enterprises, it is possible to appreciate that women feel proud of their role within them, and consider that they have broadened their view of reality, meeting people from different places, different ages and lifestyles, which allows them to widen their horizons and feel more secure about themselves:



Source: Atlas de Género del Estado de México, 2023.

Figure 3. Higher education.



Source: Atlas de Género del Estado de México (2023).

Figure 4. Economically active population.

“About my work, what gives me most satisfaction is that I have discovered what I am capable of”. (Guide, 48 years old).

The knowledge acquired from their work activity has also been useful in their daily life:

“In the administration with the finances course, this has also helped me to improve the expenses in the family”. (Cook, 28 years old).

And they have found in work and training, a space for coexistence and learning:

“I have grown and known many places, and I now know things about my community that I didn’t before; sometimes we worked with biologists or forest technicians, or some people who know about certain plants or things that they give us information about”. (Guide, 30 years old).

From the interviews, it is possible to appreciate that there is more knowledge from tourists than from peers in the enterprise or inhabitants of the locality:

“The visitors do congratulate us for the job we have done, and how we have taken care of our park; people from around here do not say anything, but those from outside do”. (Cook, 41 years old).

A growing interest has also been observed due to women’s professionalization in tourism, since the psychological empowerment impacts the organizational commitment in a positive way, giving commitment and continuity in the tourism enterprise:

“My training as a graduate in Tourism allows me to develop my professional preparation and I had always wanted to contribute to my community, applying my knowledge in my own place of origin, where I am rooted, and because I love my community”. (Guide, 29 years old).

The support and recognition of the family is crucial in women’s empowerment, although it is not always expected:

“Before, my father had a macho attitude with my mom, and now she has more freedom. My father already knew that on Fridays she would go to take a course; before, he would have told her not to go, but since he saw that we as daughters went, it opened a path for her”. (Liquor artisan, 28 years old).

Most of the interviews show that, initially, they had family problems, but that gradually their work is becoming valued:

“At the beginning it was difficult; here in town there are customs, and at the beginning it was very complicated with my spouse, my parents, and my neighbors; they would ask why I left so early and arrived so late, now they see the fruits, since they respect my work”. (Guide, 30 years old).

Social dimension

Through collective action, regional connections are generated with other people who participate in tourism:

“When I worked as a forestry promoter, I generated connections with public institutions and with tourists and even with neighboring towns that have tourism projects, since they approach us for advice”. (Guide, 29 years old).

It was observed that there are ambivalent positions regarding equity, since each enterprise has different dynamics:

“Tourism in the community is recent and from the beginning, it started with women; you can see the difference in the functions they perform, they clean and cook, although there are also guides”. (Park manager, 40 years old).

Some interview respondents suggest that they have had to face challenges and difficulties to become integrated to work, due to the domestic and agricultural tasks that they must continue to complete, and others because they did not receive permission to participate or did not have someone with whom to leave their children, although there is support between them as friends, neighbors or family members, and they support each other when necessary.

“In addition, we need to divide time between the home and the children, and that is where you can see some inequality. A peer had a baby, and it has been impossible for her to continue attending”. (Cleaning lady, 31 years old).

Sometimes tourism increases social tension and conflict, leading to a possible fragmentation of the community or deepening of inequalities:

“We started in the artisan group with many more, we were around 15 and now it is only 5 of us, not everyone commits, this demands time and dedication”. (Artisan, 30 years old).

The key factors to strengthen empowerment in the receiving community must consider the participation of the community in planning for tourism, leadership and intercommunity relationships.

Political dimension

In the political dimension, there is greater participation of women in decision-making groups than one decade ago; for example, in the positions of political representation, such as the Commissary. It should be mentioned that, in these committees of communal or *ejido* representation, where a president, a secretary and a treasurer are named; in most cases, the president is a man, and the women are named as treasurers or secretaries.

“In the decisions, at the beginning they leave you aside, and when they see that you have knowledge, they start looking for you”. (Administrator, 43 years old).

It is important to mention that one of the conditions to participate in decision making of the agrarian nuclei to which rural tourism enterprises belong, is to be part of the General Assembly, which is integrated by the title holders of plot certificates, which are the documents that confirm the right of the *comunero*, *ejidatario* or *poseionario*, to use and exploit a specific plot inside the agrarian nucleus according to Articles 16, 57 and 58 of the Agrarian Law (CDHCU, 1992) which give them rights and obligations.

“They were supposed to name a woman who worked a lot her as successor, but no, that only happens if you are a widow or if the father doesn’t have male children, it is very strange that they leave the inheritance to a woman”. (Cleaning lady, 42 years old).

Although the title holder can choose freely any person as a successor, traditionally the male descendants received the inheritance; only in the last 10 years, a greater integration of women as successors has been observed, although this continues to be a limitation for them to participate in decision making. However, there is also greater representativity of women in decision-making positions such as community assemblies, tourism committees, managers, or person in charge of enterprises.

Economic dimension

Among the participants in the tourism projects studied, many of the women are heads of households who have the responsibility of supporting the family, so in addition to performing trades or professions, they have found entrepreneurship paths that allow them to complement their family income, through agroindustry, handcraft making, and participation in tourism activities, with a flexible schedule and inside their community.

Stemming from the diversification of activities in the rural sphere, tourism has become a working option for the elderly, young people and women; the latter, as can be seen in the following table, cover several functions in the community rural tourism enterprises; some work directly as guides, cooks, waitresses, housekeepers; and others provide inputs such as basic basket products, liquors, handcrafts, medicinal plants, or offer gastronomic, forestry or agroindustry workshops. These functions can become vehicles of cultural and symbolic empowerment, especially when local knowledge is valued and economic autonomy is promoted, through commercialization.

In the enterprises analyzed, most of the managerial and coordination areas are carried out by men, while the areas of service and cleaning are mostly carried out by women. Most women are assigned activities of cooking, cleaning, customer service, restaurant, handcrafts sales, and to a lesser degree, tourism guides. Men predominate in areas of maintenance, zip-line, general management, directive committees, and technical operative functions. Women are mostly linked to tasks that require relational abilities, hospitality, and traditional knowledge. However, incipient progress was also observed in the integration of women into spaces of representation and decision making, as well as professionalization as nature guides and workshop facilitators. The presence of women in coordination or committee roles can represent emerging spaces of political empowerment; however, their low proportion in directive positions evidence asymmetry in access to decision power. The numerical and qualitative differences reveal an androcentric organizational structure, where women's empowerment is limited to the psychological and social aspects, with barriers to reach structural empowerment. It is fundamental for a plan for rural tourism, as development strategy with a gender perspective, to contemplate development programs for abilities that help to overcome the stereotypical roles assigned by gender and truly constitute vehicles for female empowerment.

Some of the women interviewed mentioned that when they have an additional income derived from their work, they feel greater safety and confidence in themselves.

“As a woman, you can devote yourself to this and have an income, it opens a landscape of being a housewife and also having extra income... in the

farmland, the workday is paid at 180 to 200 pesos and in tourism, perhaps in three days you can earn the same as a whole week as day laborer in the fields". (Park manager, 40 years old).

Most mention that the salary they receive seems fair, since it generally exceeds what they get for a workday in agricultural activities.

"Compared to my husband's salary, which is as a builder's helper, in two days I earn the same as my husband in a week. It seems like he resents it... but sometimes he is happy when we do projects together, or I tell him not to give me money, now we can invest in our house". (Guide, 30 years old).

Regarding the working conditions, women express that greater labor security is necessary, when they are employed in the community tourism enterprises; they would like to have social security, funds for loans, and benefits that are given in formal jobs.

"If there is no contract, there is no benefit at all; if they don't like your work, they fire you. In the kitchen, we trained some people and then they left. Without a contract, there are no benefits neither for some, nor for others". (Cook, 28 years old).

Cultural dimension

Women mention that, when they collaborate in tourism enterprises, this allows them to socialize, not only with their men and women collaborators, but also with visitors, with whom they carry out cultural exchange.

In only two of the enterprises, they consider that tourism activities have helped to value customs and traditions, to divulge their culture, and to sell local handcrafts.

"The group of waist-loom artisans, if it were not for tourism, they would have already rescued their attire, but they would not continue to make it, or diversify its production, the same as liquors". (Liquor artisan, 28 years old).

They like that tourists recognize their knowledge, it gives them joy and self-confidence, so they have developed skills and have sought to complement the services of food and lodging with the sales of handcrafts, traditional beverages, plants, preserves, and workshops. Thus, rural tourism becomes a tool for cultural management, which places women as custodians and transmitters of traditional knowledge.

Environmental dimension

The environmental dimension of empowerment refers to the capacity to influence and make decisions for the efficient conservation and management of natural resources (ONU, 2019), considering environmental education,

participation in conservation projects, and adoption of sustainable practices. Women in rural environments have a deep knowledge of nature (FAO, 2018), so their traditional knowledge about plants, animals and ecosystems is of vital importance for the implementation of projects for conservation and environmental improvement (Agarwal, 2009, UNDP, 2016).

“We are working with schools, we have taught courses to the children so they could tell us what the most beautiful aspect of their community was, we participate in trash collection, and we tell them about the importance of the environment”. (Guide, 30 years old).

DISCUSSION

Touristic activity can be a factor for empowerment of rural women (Friedmann, 1992; Scheyvens, 1999), in each of its dimensions; it is necessary to define innovative strategies that allow the professionalization and the empowerment of women through tourism, as mentioned by Garrido (2015: 85): “Women are strong, capable, creative, but they are not leading the sector. They must be aware of their skills and training is key for this, easing access to resources and benefits”.

There is a lack of information about how touristic activities are integrated with productive activities and their repercussion in the households (Hernández *et al.*; 2015), so it is of vital importance to analyze the impact of this activity in rural women’s daily lives.

In the psychological dimension, empowerment is characterized by achieving greater self-confidence, work satisfaction, strengthening of self-esteem, autonomous decision making, as well as the development of specialized skills and knowledge (Scheyvens and Van der Watt, 2021). Therefore, a work environment that promotes the development of specific abilities, the participation in decision making and creative freedom, can achieve a significant increase in confidence in the women involved in rural tourism, as well as promoting changes in local structures to generate wellbeing (Christens, 2012). In order for this to happen, there must be family support, which is a fundamental pillar for women who combine the responsibilities of the household with work performance, assuming operative roles, of leadership and tourism project management; as mentioned by García *et al.* (2022), the personal aspect and the nearby environment are determinant in empowerment processes. The development of abilities related to service should be complemented with tools for personal development and soft skills.

In the social dimension, it is important for there to be equity and inclusion in the integration of work groups to be sustainable and competitive, allowing channeling toward the common objective of local development. For this purpose, it is necessary to establish accompaniment programs for beginners,

sharing personal and professional experiences of participation in different enterprises, as well as fostering the encounter and dialogue where women who collaborate in rural tourism projects can build support networks. In the economic dimension, it is critical to generate dignified employment, promote entrepreneurship through the valuation of knowhow, elevate the quality of life, and contribute to economic security to reduce rural poverty, since women who have economic empowerment tend to reinvest their income in their family and community (UNWTO, 2019). Therefore, the relevance of promoting organizational figures which give social security, allow access to entrepreneurial culture, and strengthen entrepreneurship, as well as creating commercial networks that connect people, products and territories.

In the political dimension, women must have broad participation in decision making of the projects, with inclusive and transparent leadership in accountability, granting equality of opportunities, and equitable access to resources and lands, since in Latin America, women own less than 20% of the land (CEPAL, 2015). Presently, some women participate in local committees, cooperatives and community organizations, where they are occupying leadership positions and more active roles in the management of rural tourism. The inclusion of women in decision making is essential, since it contributes to a more equitable and efficient management (Scheyvens, 2010), which gradually overcomes the cultural restrictions of gender. Therefore, supporting women in the formation of groups with political impact is important, which advocate for a more inclusive and equitable tourism sector, where gender quotas are implemented in the structures of local governance.

In the cultural dimension, Tucker and Boonabaana (2011) state that women are the guardians of local traditions; in addition to this, they have broad knowledge of traditional medicine, traditional cuisine, and the worldview. In the presence of this wealth, it is fundamental for initiatives of cultural tourism to respect local customs and traditions (Castillo, 2024), attaining direct benefits for local artisans and supporting women in the preservation of culture.

In the environmental dimension, this type of project must protect the natural resources, as well as develop sustainably through the adequate management of residues, the use of alternative energy, and bioconstruction; however, this requires significant investment, which are often not available in rural communities. Therefore, it is considered necessary to have the support from experts, since as the UNDP (2016) contemplates, women carry out a key role in the implementation of local strategies, in face of climate change.

In addition to this, the multidimensional nature of empowerment must be added, which cuts through the individual and the collective, the public and the private, tradition and innovation. Despite these tensions, it is possible to notice an ambivalent nature of rural tourism with regards to empowerment;

however, the ability to generate resources and to develop self-esteem are the two most important mechanisms to build new relationships between men and women. Nevertheless, there is still much to advance regarding the attainment of conditions of equity, fundamentally in the conquest of spaces of power and decision making for women, in the context of rural organizational structures.

CONCLUSIONS

Empowerment is a process in constant evolution, expressed in social movements, where women seek to give new meaning to the use of power, not only for their benefit, but rather to transform society; therefore, it is important to recognize their political value, in terms of their ability to generate institutional, economic and paradigm changes.

This study allows to delve into knowledge of the cultural context where rural tourism develops and to capture the social dynamics, the relationships and the challenges that women face, in their process of empowerment. It also serves to analyze the connections between rural tourism and community strengthening, identifying patterns and processes that influence women's empowerment. Since it is women who mostly collaborate in tourism development, opportunity areas open to reposition the role of women, contributing to more dialogue-centered family and cultural structures with the current reality.

In general terms, rural tourism is an efficient tool for women's empowerment; however, their role is ambivalent, due to the economic and heteropatriarchal system in which the activity develops; therefore, it is necessary for projects to point to a structural change in the community base with gender perspective. It should be highlighted that women's empowerment in rural tourism is not only an individual process but also has a collective impact. As more women are empowered and reach positions of leadership, rural tourism is strengthened, becoming more inclusive and diverse, providing opportunities for growth and development for everyone, regardless of their gender. It is necessary to bring to light and value the work of women in this area, recognizing their essential contribution to the sustainable development of rural communities.

Future studies must incorporate the perspective of inter-gender relationships and establish comparisons between territories, which show different results in matters of rural women's empowerment, with the aim of recapitulating the lessons learned from successful cases. This study contributes useful elements to outline public policies in matters of rural tourism, as well as practical implications for the development of a tourism segment in clear growth.

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