

ROLE OF SUNDARBANS *BAGH BIDHWA* ENTREPRENEURS IN TOURISM

INTRODUCTION

The policy support for women's empowerment through sustainable tourism is gaining currency and fast emerging as a key area of research that focuses on the intersection between gender, tourism and development (Bakas, Costa, Breda & Durão, 2018; Figueroa-Domecq, de Jong & Williams, 2020). Authors consider support for the creative enterprise of women entrepreneurs in the greening of the industry is key to empowering them and facilitating the dismantling of social and policy barriers to their participation in the tourism sector (Jennings and Brush, 2013; Valeri and Katsoni, 2021).

In this study we conceptualise the role of women entrepreneurs in the Sundarbans, characterised here as *bagha bidhwas*, encapsulating their (dis)empowered status due to widowhood or divorce and highlight how their economic contribution is contributing to sustainable rural tourism development in the region. When a man is killed by a tiger, his wife is then known as a *bagh bidhwa*, or tiger widow, who not only has to support herself and her family on her own, but also bears the brunt of the social stigma attached to the label. However, we found the term *bagh bidhwa* was also applied to divorced and single women entrepreneurs.

The Sundarbans, located in the south-west of Bangladesh with a total area of 10,000 km² (Fig. 1), is the largest contiguous mangrove forest in the world and hosts a number of endangered species including the Royal Bengal Tiger, Ganges and Irawadi dolphins, estuarine crocodiles and river terrapin (WHC, 1997). While there is no commonly accepted definition of sustainable rural tourism, its contribution to economic development and quality of life, in line with sustainable development goals, especially 12 ("sustainable consumption and production") and 16 ("sustainable societies"), is often highlighted (Sharpley & Roberts, 2004).

In our study, we also consider 5 on gender equality and empowerment of women and girls to acknowledge the role women entrepreneurs play in sustaining the tourism economy. The definition of a woman entrepreneur adopted in this study encompasses those who are involved in making independent business decisions (Tajeddini, Ratten & Denisa, 2017). These women may accelerate the generation, dissemination and application of innovative income-generation activities by their willingness to take risks and seek new opportunities.

Our study is one of the first to conceptualise the role of women entrepreneurs in contributing to sustainable rural tourism in the Sundarbans and addressing the impact of broader societal and ecological factors that create the context within which gendered tourisms are (re)produced and challenged. In studying gender-tourism interface, we focus

on how women's entrepreneurial ventures contribute to the strengthening of their bargaining power in the household and the patriarchal community of rural Bangladesh. Informed by empowerment theory and research on entrepreneurial marketing, this study considers: *i)* what insights do women entrepreneurs' accounts offer in identifying key challenges they face and the opportunities available to them in the region? and *ii)* what dimensions of women's creative agency and enterprise are at play in supporting their contribution to sustainable rural tourism?

We now present the conceptual framework to theorise the creative enterprise of women entrepreneurs who stave off social isolation and discrimination emanating from their divorced or widowed status to create spaces of communal learning and camaraderie with minimal and sometimes no incomes or access to market-oriented community initiatives.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Women's entrepreneurship is recognised as key for reducing poverty, achieving gender equality and women's empowerment in developing economies (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2019). In China, India, Thailand and Malaysia support for women's entrepreneurship is gaining significance in economic development plans as policy initiatives seek to position women entrepreneurs as central to economic growth (Agarwal & Lenka, 2018; Karim & Hart, 2012). In Bangladesh, over the last two decades, micro-credit programmes have facilitated women's involvement in labour force activities (Khan & Rahman, 2016), but little is known about their empowerment and entrepreneurial journeys.

Despite prevailing patriarchal norms in Bangladesh that curtail efforts to enable women to take part in tourism, there is growing evidence that women's entrepreneurial ventures are generating much-needed cash and providing them with an empowered societal identity (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015; Zafarullah & Nawaz, 2019). In their work *Power and Identity*, Sindic, Barreto and Costa-Lopes (2014) theorise empowered social identity emerging from a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, better decision-making power and transformative action of subordinated groups struggling to change their condition and in doing so becoming more conscious of the possibility of enacting such change.

Women's role in tourism was originally conceived in accordance with the women in development approach, which centred on small-scale, women-only projects to counter male dominance (Miller & Razavi, 1995). Over time, the focus of women-centric initiatives, encapsulated in the gender and development approach, became inclusive, foregrounding the social construction of gender roles and power relations. The premise is that since these roles

and relations are socially constructed, they can be deconstructed and, therefore, men can become facilitators in efforts to improve the status of women (Alarcón & Cole, 2019).

Social scientists focus on women's collective agency that can empower them to participate in political activities, gain control over their lives and support the empowerment of others (Chaudhuri, 2016; Friedmann, 1992). In social marketing research, the concept is linked to positive outcomes associated with individuals' capacity to develop self-efficacy, competence and control in personal situations and the achievement of social good via clearly defined empowerment goals (French & Gordon, 2019; Kamin, Kubacki & Atanasova, 2022). Aghazamani & Hunt's (2017) comprehensive analysis of articles on tourism and empowerment reveals five salient themes: i) empowering impact of tourism on residents; ii) the empowerment of tourism employees; iii) tourism's influence on gender roles; iv) ways that tourism can engender the disempowerment of individuals; and v) tourism's capacity to empower tourists.

Our conceptual framework, underlining the interconnection between the different dimensions of empowerment and the entrepreneurial marketing orientation, adds spiritual and environmental angles to women's empowerment experiences resulting from their (re)productive roles in the community.

Theoretical approaches

Theoretically, this study is guided by Scheyvens' (1999) empowerment framework and work on entrepreneurial marketing. Focusing on ecotourism, Scheyvens developed four dimensions of empowerment: social, psychological, economic and political. A social dimension of empowerment implies community cohesion and subalterns' ability to combat subordination, discrimination, poverty and inequality (Peterson et al., 2005). Psychological empowerment stems from community pride, enhanced as a result of visitors' interest in place assets and recognition of the uniqueness and value of local culture and knowledge (Boley & Johnson Gaither, 2016; Scheyvens, 1999). Economic empowerment relates to a community's access to resources and tourism related employment opportunities (Boley & McGehee, 2014). The political dimension of empowerment implies the broadening of the power base so that women's groups are included in decision making and the creation of a safe platform for the marginalised to articulate their concerns, develop solutions to their collective problems and realise their potential (Scheyvens, 2003).

Despite the conceptual significance of the empowerment framework to sustaining sustainable rural tourism, there has been little research on the outcomes associated with empowering women entrepreneurs in the Sundarbans using these dimensions. Prior research

examines how sustainable rural tourism has the potential to empower women despite multiple and culturally constructed systems of subordination embedded in race, ethnicity, age, education (Gil Arroyo, Barbieri, Sotomayor & Knollenberg, 2019; LaPan, Morais, Wallace & Barbieri, 2016; LaPan, Morais, Wallace, Barbieri, & Floyd, 2021; Savage, Barbieri & Jakes, 2021). We build upon this work by not only testing Scheyvens' (1999) framework empirically in rural Bangladesh, but also adding environmental and spiritual dimensions of empowerment.

This is key as women's status in Bangladesh is one of "practising or displaying varying degrees of veiling, seclusion, domestic confinement, obedience and other symbols of modesty such as silence or self-effacement in accordance with cultural expectations of femininity" (Head, Yount, Hennink & Sterk, 2015, p. 361). Within this context, women derive resilience from their religious and spiritual beliefs. Thus, studies on women's entrepreneurship in developing economies need to consider the spiritual dimension of empowerment, which is "linked fundamentally to religiosity, prevalent spiritual practices and beliefs, plus faith-based congregations that offer an array of resources (e.g., financial aid, information and emotional support) in coping with psychosocial stressors" (Saxena, Mowla & Chowdhury, 2020, p. 1577). Women entrepreneurs' personal religiosity deriving from their resilience and the spiritual affiliation they experience with the Sundarbans ties in with Allerton's (2009) work on "people's spiritual entanglements with the landscape" (p. 18), which suggests that for Southeast Asian communities, the physical environment is imbued with both religious symbolism and requirements for virtuous conduct to preserve its sacredness. Indeed, in a women, environment and development framework, Davidson (1990) identifies women as key custodians of natural resources, adding that "current wisdom is to see women not just as victims but as major local assets to be harnessed in the interest of better environmental management" (p. 5).

Following other authors, this study considers empowerment as a reflexive process that is experienced differentially by women as some continue to experience a disempowered state due to personal and social circumstances, whereas others embrace a proactive approach to problem solving, gain increased political understanding and business acumen (Gutierrez, 1995; Kaminski, Kaufman, Graubarth & Robins, 2000; Zimmerman, 1995). This corresponds with Zimmerman's (1995) contention that empowerment is "a series of experiences in which individuals learn to see a closer correspondence between their goals and a sense of how to achieve them, gain greater access to and control over resources and . . . mastery over their lives" (p. 583). Thus, we conceptualise women entrepreneurs' journey as one of mobility through different stages of empowerment as they develop skills, acquire resources and contribute to sustainable rural tourism development (see Table 2).

Further, to comprehend how women entrepreneurs manage their ventures, we consider research on entrepreneurial marketing to focus on their value creation efforts. A typical entrepreneur is theorised from a male perspective and the perceived entrepreneurial identity is predictably embedded in masculinity (Swail & Marlow, 2018). Hence, this work focuses on women entrepreneurs' opportunity-seeking, risk-taking and innovation-focused entrepreneurial marketing strategies that underlie their efforts at managing their enterprises and balancing their social roles as homemakers and carers. In doing so, we contribute to previous work on intersectionality that offers a useful lens to focus on the influence of social practices, institutional arrangements and cultural ideologies on women's entrepreneurial ventures and how they sustain their enterprise by negotiating the interplay between gender, religion and ethnicity (Barrett & Vershinina, 2017; Valdez, 2016).

Previous studies on gender and tourism have reported women's supporting role, whereby they help men with agritourism initiatives, farming, fishing and logging and by performing household activities, but also note that women could be key players in bringing about sustainable rural tourism (Fons, Fierro & Patiño, 2011; Mitchell & Hall, 2005). However, sustainable rural tourism is not recognised as means to facilitate women's environmental empowerment enabling them to contest patriarchal authority in marginal economies like Bangladesh by deriving socioeconomic and cultural benefits through their ecological ventures. Further, its potential to offer women an opportunity to reinforce their spiritual status within their family and community by performing roles, once considered masculine (e.g., managing finances according to Islamic codes), has received little attention in tourism studies.

Hence, our use of the entrepreneurial marketing approach, to conceptualise how women leverage capital, customer loyalty and value, undertake risks and engage in innovation-focused activities using existing resources and competencies in a context defined by lack, socio-cultural and gender-related constraints, is well-suited. Entrepreneurial marketing can be understood as firms' marketing process that allows them to pursue opportunities in uncertain market situations and act entrepreneurially (Dawson & Henley, 2015; Morris, Schindehutte & LaForge, 2002). We employ entrepreneurial marketing lens to understand women entrepreneurs' marketing strategies that are both creative and unsophisticated and suited to addressing the unique constraints they encounter (Gartner & Carter, 2003). In particular, women with strong religious / spiritual beliefs and environmental values use them for tension resolution work to both defy patriarchal norms and integrate commercial logic to strategically expand their business (Vu, 2021; York, O'Neil, Sarasvathy, 2016).

Seven key dimensions of entrepreneurial marketing are noted in the research. Authors identify four underlying dimensions – proactiveness, risk taking, innovativeness and opportunity seeking – as being closely linked to the entrepreneurial orientation of the firm (Morris et al., 2002; Zahra & Garvis, 2000). The fifth dimension – resource leveraging, which includes bartering, borrowing, renting, leasing, sharing, recycling, contracting and outsourcing – is a common theme in both marketing (especially guerrilla marketing) and entrepreneurship literature (Miller, Wright & Breton-Miller, 2015). The final two dimensions – customer intensity and value creation – are associated with a firm’s market orientation shaped by entrepreneurs’ canny observation of market trends (Eggers, Niemand, Kraus & Breier, 2020).

In this study, five entrepreneurial marketing dimensions – proactiveness, risk taking, opportunity seeking, resource leveraging and value creation – are considered salient. Proactiveness implies action orientation, whereby an entrepreneur creates and launches new products in the market and experiments with a number of marketing tactics to reduce costs (Morris et al., 2002). Aggressive competition forces small enterprises to become proactive with a focus on economic self-interest which encourages entrepreneurs to continually seek “ . . . competitive advantage through incremental changes to the established methods of production, sales and distribution” (Morris et al., 2002, p. 5).

Risk taking denotes the uncertainty resulting from entrepreneurial activities and reflects entrepreneurs’ willingness to pursue opportunities with uncertain outcomes out of economic considerations and a fear of missing chances (Luu & Ngo, 2019). Opportunity-seeking behaviour stems from individual owners’ identities, the business type, suppliers and the ethnic or religious networks within which firms are embedded (Gregori, Holzmann & Wdowiak, 2021). This translates into owners’ ingenuity resulting in resource leveraging or ‘doing more with less’. Leveraging drives strategic decisions, recognising value in exploiting underutilised resources and employing creative methods of buying, selling, branding and marketing. Firms also engage in value creation by supporting new ideas, seeking novelty and adopting creative processes that may result in new products and services (Morris et al., 2002).

In general, the research distinguishes between *pull* (i.e., internal) and *push* (i.e., external) factors that underlie women-owned and -managed enterprises (Lowe & Marriot, 2006; Orhan & Scott, 2001). Pull factors or opportunity-seeking attitudes relate to entrepreneurs’ desire for financial independence, innovation, a sense of achievement and flexibility (Kirkwood, 2009). Push factors force or push women to undertake risks and become self-employed because of inadequate family income and difficulty in finding a suitable job or work with sufficiently flexible timings to accommodate familial responsibilities (Lowe &

Marriot, 2006). In developing economies, women's reasons for starting a business are almost always driven by negative circumstances, such as low family income and lack of employment opportunities in formal workplaces (Richardson, Howarth & Finnegan, 2004). In comparison with men, many disadvantaged female entrepreneurs suffer from mindset constraints, which include risk aversion, a lack of goal setting and planning, and an inability to overcome obstacles to innovate and identify / exploit new opportunities (Duflo, 2012).

In positioning women as key actors in bringing about sustainable rural tourism and in creating viable links between various local social, cultural, economic and environmental resources, this study draws upon a production/reproduction conceptualisation of women's socioeconomic roles in rural economies (Deb, Haque & Thompson, 2015). Women's productive labour extends to the marketplace, making their entrepreneurial efforts appear as commercialised housework. Their entrepreneurial ventures are distinct from their reproductive domestic work roles and offer a means to redefine traditional and patriarchal gender relations. Predominantly, women's participation in the labour force and their societal position as economic agents have been studied through global development discourse and practice lens that tends to perceive oppressed women as objects requiring intervention and seldom attributed with agency (Chowdhury, 2010, Feldman, 2001; Kabeer, 2000).

Although gender oppression and violence against women persists, our focus is on offering a complex analysis of how despite odds they negotiate patriarchal norms through tourism work to empower themselves and other women in their community. Next, we present the study context, outlining key attributes of the case area and the research design.

STUDY CONTEXT

Research Methods and Study Case profile'

Geographically, the Sundarbans, one of the largest contiguous blocks of mangrove forest in the world, is located in the south of Bangladesh in Khulna Division and is the main outflow of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers (see Fig. 2). Human-tiger conflicts in the Sundarbans have become a regular occurrence due to the growing population and communities' reliance on natural resources. It is estimated that forty people, mostly men, are killed by tigers, crocodiles or other ferocious animals annually (Debnath, 2020).

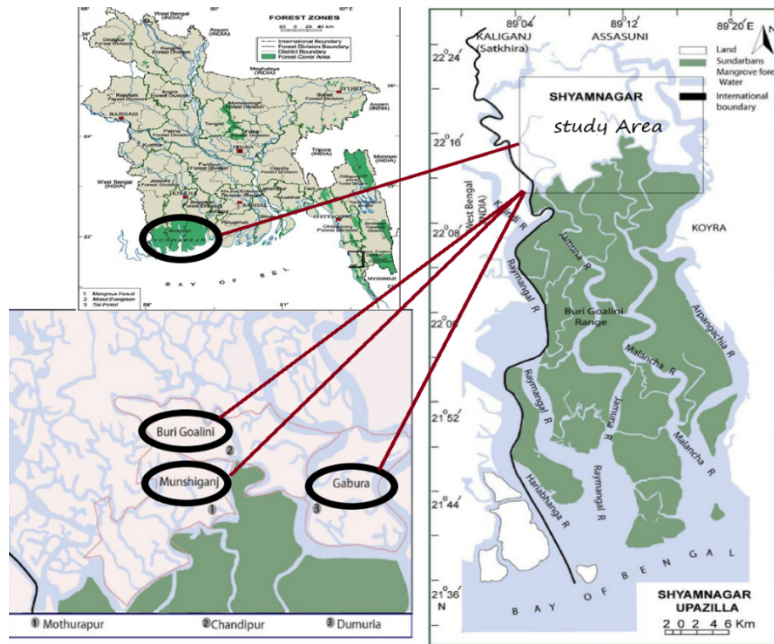


Fig. 1. Study area.

Source: authors.

Women who are impacted by tiger related deaths of men face gender related discrimination because of conservative Islamic regulations (BBS, 2012). Only 17% of females were reported to be educated, compared with 38% of males and lack access to basic amenities, such as electricity, fresh running water and health care (BBS, 2010). Besides, women who live alone are vulnerable to sexual abuse, as well as attacks by wild animals (Townsend, 2010).

The data were collected in the *union parishads* (rural councils) of Munshigonj, Burigoalini and Gabura in Shyamnagar Upazila, or municipality, due to the predominance of female-headed households as well as their tourist appeal (see Table 1). For instance, Munshigonj attracts tourists with interest in biodiversity-rich mangrove forest. Burigoalini is considered the second most popular tourist entry point in the Sundarbans due to good transport links with Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital, as well as a range of overnight accommodation facilities that have created jobs for women (Islam, Rahman, Iftekhar and Rakkibu, 2013). Gabura is a small island surrounded by the river Kholpetua which makes it popular with visitors for its local cuisine. Both Burigoalini and Gabura are dependent on natural resources resulting in a number of human-tiger conflicts and causing them to be labelled as *bidhwa polli* (widow villages) due a large number of tiger widows (Reza, Feeroz & Islam, 2002).

Table 1
Profile of data collection sites

Shyamnagar Upazila			
Key attributes	Munshigonj	Burigoalini	Gabura
Total area (sq. km)	49	17	33
Total population	32,256 (Male: 17,211; Female: 15,045)	37,400 (Male: 19,545; Female: 17,855)	31,115 (Male: 15,398; Female: 15,717)
Total households	7,204	5,998	6,753
Literacy rate	66.3% (Male: 58.9%; Female: 55.3%)	74% (Male: No data; Female: No data)	35.9% (Male: 38.8%; Female: 33.2%)
Religion	Muslim: 74.5% Hindu: 21.5% Christian: 3.5% Others: 0.5%	Muslim: 58% Hindu: 38% Others: 4%	Muslim: 96% Hindu: 4%
Female-headed households (%)	40	40	60

Source: authors and Bangladesh Population Census 2011.

Around 30% of women in these localities generate income by cultivating rice, jute, wheat, vegetables, oil seeds and spices and are also (in)directly involved in fish farming and the sale of handicrafts (Karim, Ahmed, Talukder, Taslim, Rahman, and Karim, 2006). Only a small proportion (20%) work in service and tourism sectors (BBS, 2005). Despite their significant economic contribution, women face wage discrimination and violence, have low literacy rates and occupy a deprived social position (Abdullah, 2014).

Research Design

In order to extend the scope of conventional gender and tourism research guided by the interpretivist paradigm, this study applied a visual ethnographic approach (insufficiently used in tourism research) in its documentation of women entrepreneurs' daily routines and their experiences (Pink, 2013). During the analysis, photographs offered rich contextual data that otherwise would have been difficult to access only by observing and interviewing as is often the case in ethnographic studies (Ayala & Koch, 2019; Desmond, 2014). Broadly, our use of photographs: i) brought the researcher (i.e., first author who obtained photographs with participants' permission) closer to different aspects of textual and visual data; ii) allowed an examination of entrepreneurs' identities echoed in the images and then in the reverse order

offered the team insights into participants' narratives; and iii) helped authors to deconstruct discursive realities by contrasting and comparing participants' narratives and images to focus on resonance (i.e., what was present and missing in their empowerment and entrepreneurial journeys) based on accounts and pictures provided. Thus, women entrepreneurs' pictures, reproduced with their permission, not only present authentic representations of their reality, but also help authenticate narratives when interpreted using the immaterial, the invisible and the sensory nature of women's experiences and knowledges (Smith, 2015).

Ontologically, this work was guided by social constructivism, which implies that women entrepreneurs' experiences were treated as a subjective phenomenon, constructed through the multiple meanings they conveyed while interacting with each other, family members, their customers and other social actors (e.g., third sector workers, agency representatives and men in their lives). The epistemological position of interpretivism allowed an insight into the everyday communal world (e.g., through participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork) to grasp socially constructed meanings and then reconstruct them as the data were analysed (Uddin & Hamiduzzaman, 2009).

Snowball sampling was used in the purposeful selection of participants and the first author used her insider status, acquired through immersion in communal events, such as village-level meetings and informal conversations, to gain access. All participants were recruited on a voluntary basis and a consent form was completed by each in which they allowed the use of their narratives and visual evidence (including pictures of self and others). Pseudonyms are used for all participants throughout this article to protect their identities.

Nevertheless, building trust required patience and an accommodation of participants' demands. For instance, as the first author is a married Bangladeshi woman, not wearing a nose pin and a *hijab* (head covering) became an issue with women who evoked its adverse impact upon her husband's well-being. To overcome their disapproval and gain trust, the researcher had to buy a nose pin and a *hijab*, which she continued to wear during the entire length of the field visit. Gradually, local acceptance grew, and the women's hospitality allowed the researcher to immerse herself in their daily lives. The poignant use of *shade* by the participants should be noted as they only shared disturbing details of episodes of violence and oppression with the first author in a dark corner of their home, behind closed doors or in a secluded area of the forest away from the physically and symbolically unsafe open spaces.

The fieldwork was conducted between February and July 2017 and all interviews were conducted in the local language (Bengali) and then translated into English and verified carefully for accuracy. Where it was not possible to translate a meaning successfully, local

words were retained in reporting the situation-specific dynamics. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 42 participants (36 women and 6 men), based on their age, gender, religion, and marital and employment status. We also included a minority of male participants where we noted their significant role in supporting women's entrepreneurial ventures and helping them to achieve an empowered status. Of the 36 women entrepreneurs, nine worked in food-related sectors (processing, cooking, gathering natural resources, such as honey, which they supplied to local tourism businesses); three operated as tour guides; one owned an ecotourism cottage; 12 were in the fish and crab farming sectors; eight in handicraft making and the sale of souvenirs, including pottery making; one as a restaurant manager; and two were in the third sector working with women entrepreneurs to secure the sale of their produce and who also classified themselves as entrepreneurs.

All interviews, conducted informally for a minimum of 41 minutes, were recorded along with field notes and reflections from participant observation that were updated on a daily basis for the whole duration of the data collection phase (Veal, 2018). Upon reaching data saturation, both at the level of the dataset as a whole and in relation to the data provided by participants when the first author began noting the repetition of themes (e.g., social stigma attached to widowhood and the divorced status), the data collection phase discontinued (lasting approximately a year). Thereafter, authors jointly undertook the analysis via: *i*) open coding, taking textual data and breaking it into discrete parts; and *ii*) axial coding by drawing connections between codes (Saunders et al., 2018).

Thematic narrative analysis was applied in identifying key themes from the recorded interviews (especially narrative segments, saturated with women's negative and positive emotions) and observational data to construct a profile of participants' multiple roles and experiences. Further, we compared the themes to categorise participants according to how they conveyed their empowerment status by reflecting on their entrepreneurial undertaking through the lens of their current comprehension of their societal standing and the manner in which they interpreted their past experiences (Table 2).

Thus, of the 36 women entrepreneurs, only 12 were deemed to enjoy an empowered status gained due to "patriarchal bargains" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 274), or by adopting traditional 'modesty markers' such as the *burqa* (a long, loose garment covering the whole body) and *hijab* (head cover) in public and by assuming a quiet and self-effacing demeanour in the market. Ten women are listed as being only somewhat empowered because of their lack of agency in addressing socio-cultural and personal issues (Table 2).

Table 2

Empowerment status of the Sundarbans women entrepreneurs

Empowerment status	Number of women	Key indicators
Empowered	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talent to “expand their life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them” (Kabeer, 2001, p. 19) • Able to participate at all levels of decision making in social, political, religious and cultural contexts (Porter, 2013) • Capacity to empower other women by offering them employment or engaging in marketplace transactions
Towards achieving empowerment	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack decision-making power and necessary skills and are hence considered somewhat empowered/or towards achieving empowerment (Aghazamani, Kerstetter & Allison, 2020) • Actively engaged in upskilling themselves and seeking education • Actively seeking income-generating activities to reach an empowered status
Disempowered	14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack agency. • An inability to make effective life choices (Mishra, 2014). • Options are denied to these subservient women, who are disrespected by their families and society (Kabeer, 2001)

Source: authors' data.

The 14 of the women entrepreneurs who experienced disempowerment and vulnerability was due to the routine violence they faced at the hands of their relatives and their lack of access to finance despite the time and labour they devoted to their enterprises (Table 2). However, these women still play significant roles in the Sundarbans' economy and empowered women work within the prevalent socio-cultural constraints and cannot be considered empowered in a Western context.

Overall, the above-mentioned classification (derived from interviews and participant observation) helped in unpacking the intricacy inherent in the empowerment concept and acknowledging most of the participants' apparent desire to collude with the structures that subdue them. For instance, the participants' ties with men (e.g., fathers, husbands, brothers and sons) are embedded in love and respect as well as male supremacy in their lives. In the next section we discuss how (dis)empowerment is experienced by women entrepreneurs given that their entrepreneurial identity is inherently tied up with familial gender roles and local expectations of how men and women should conduct themselves in public and private spheres.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In elaborating how *bagh bidhwa* entrepreneurs' business ventures support them in acquiring empowerment at different levels, this study responds to authors' calls to reframe the conceptualisation of women's tourism entrepreneurship so that feminist debates are positioned more firmly in theorising the context within which they operate (Cole, 2018; Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2020). Accordingly, women's accounts helped to comprehend empowerment as a process of personal transformation and resilience aligned with learning and understanding and acquisition of skills and, by default, disempowerment to their absence (Bullo, 2018). Largely, the dis/empowerment processes are associated with an increase or decrease in the degree of agency that women perceived themselves to possess. This in turn impacted upon their self-perception both negatively and positively.

Persistence of Disempowerment, Violence and Social Stigma

Whilst the Sundarbans' *bagh bidhwa* entrepreneurs support their families, they are treated as harbingers of bad luck and consequently face isolation, loneliness and violence. For example, Sona, a tiger widow, who lost two husbands to tigers, lives on the outskirts of the village as a social outcast in a life of extreme poverty. From her account of the timing of menarche, we estimated her age to be approximately 55 years old. She has three children and was married to her first husband before reaching the age of puberty. Within a year of her marriage and attaining puberty, she became pregnant with her first child. When Sona was roughly 16/17 years old, her husband was killed by a tiger while collecting honey and firewood in the jungle and following which: "*My mother-in-law took all my things and threw them on the street*".

A few months later, Sona was asked to return because of her son and her mother-in-law got her married to the younger brother of Sona's deceased husband. She enjoyed a brief period of marital bliss and gave birth to two children. Unfortunately, when her second husband was also killed by a tiger in the sixth year of her marriage, Sona's life took a turn for the worse, as she explained:

I am now regarded as a curse by my own people. My children and I are no longer welcome at weddings or any auspicious social functions.

Women like Sona use linguistic strategies with which they construct experiences of disempowerment "I am now regarded as a curse" to both normalise and dismiss their ordeal.

In the absence of a stable income, Sona took to fish farming for sustenance which can be seen as guided by the entrepreneurial marketing strategies of proactiveness, opportunity seeking and risk taking. However, her misfortune did not end here. As a consequence of her firm's dependence on the Sundarbans, she was sexually assaulted in the *jhop* (jungle), an episode she narrated to the first author in a dark corner, which at the time of the interview she had not disclosed to her family.

Like Sona, another *bagh bidhwa*, referred to here as Rani (aged 31 and a fish farming entrepreneur) faced social ostracisation. Rani explained:

When the tiger killed my husband, he killed everything in my life. Everyone blames me for his death, but specifically my mother-in-law uses choicest expletives - "Dayani" [witch], "Rakhossi" [demon] - . . . beats me with a broom pulling at my hair in front of my children.... within a month I was thrown out of her house.

In the socio-spatial schema of gender, the act of throwing widowed women out of their marital home is closely connected to the culturally constructed and hegemonic notions of what is improper and hence 'out of place'. Rather than challenging the status quo, both women (Sona and Rani) and the other entrepreneurs who had experienced discrimination positioned themselves negatively in relation to the prevalent discourses of womanhood and respectability.

Thus, in their narrative negative emotions (e.g., dissatisfaction and repulsion) surfaced primarily because of how they perceived *others*, who comply with societal standards of normality, viewed them due to their incongruous socio-cultural status. Hence, their disempowerment stems largely from the negative self-evaluation and perceived lack of agency that they as 'sufferers' endure. A few have taken solace in Islam as a means of coping and exercise agency through the negotiation of an Islamic identity that is not captured in the conventional framings of Islam and gender.

Towards Achieving Empowerment

Apart from deriving spiritual empowerment from their faith, we noted that women entrepreneurs are using their enterprises to influence decision-making in their community, thus linking both economic and political forms of empowerment as Scheyvens & Russell (2012) underline. Indeed, women's work has the potential to shift the power balance both within the family and society, as noted from Sabina's story. Sabina was married off at twelve and, when faced with physical violence on a daily basis, sought divorce within a year and returned to her parents' house. Her divorced status cast her in a *social pariah* position like the *bagh bidhwas*

Rani and Sona. However, her mother's moral support contributed to Sabina's empowerment journey who is now a graduate and works as a school teacher in addition to managing her handicrafts business since 2014.

Thus, Sabina's entrepreneurial marketing strategies are a composite of proactiveness, resource leveraging and value creation, as she is using both her own skills and those of other women in her locality to manufacture hand-made woollen and cotton toys and souvenirs (Fig. 2). Although Sabina sells locally, mainly at exhibitions and fairs, her ultimate aim is to export. However, her attempts at achieving a fully empowered status are saddled with complexity.



Fig. 2. Sabina's handiwork.

Source: authors' data (interview conducted in May 2017, Burigoalini village in Shyamnagar).

Sabina explained:

It is difficult for me to establish myself as I face huge social impediments including those from my own parents. For example, training is essential to develop any business and when I found an opportunity in another city, my parents did not let me go. There is a sense of shame in letting women travel alone and be independent because of our religious and cultural values.

Sabina's experience demonstrates that the patriarchal system that favours men engenders a process of othering that is oppressive, defensive and confrontational, limiting the opportunities for enterprising women who are regulated so that they perform femininity acceptably (Schuler, Hashemi, Badal &, Nazneen 2018).

Similarly, Pia, a 19-year-old woman who divorced within two years of her marriage, now works as a tour guide and teaches local children from other marginalised families in her spare time. Although on the surface Pia has rejected the identity – of being corrupt and loose – ascribed to single women in Bangladesh because it did not correspond with how she perceived herself, her narrative was fraught with tension. Like Sona, she escorted the first author into a

dark room in her house as she narrated her story of abuse and domestic violence. This is what Pia said:

If you see my face or I can see yours, I will not be able to . . . share what happened. I am in a constant sense of shame and discomfort despite the fact that what happened to me was not my fault. Well, within three months of my marriage, my husband and his family started to ask me to get money from my family. My parents gave them 40000 taka [£380], but this just fuelled their desire for more... when I refused, they tortured and starved me... this went on for months until fortunately, one of my neighbours informed my family, who rescued me. I was very close to death. I am in no doubt my husband's family would have killed me.

This young entrepreneur's resilience is remarkable and similar to others who are classified as being in the process of achieving empowerment. Her account ties in with studies on family honour, deeply embedded in Islamic ideology, that socialises women from a young age to sustain it by refraining from any jeopardising actions (Gill, 2006; Sultana, 2009).

Empowered Women Entrepreneurs

The narratives of women entrepreneurs who displayed increased confidence offer an insight into how they have been able to create business opportunities through self-transformation which ties in with the phenomenological research on empowerment that refers to participants' greater understanding of their capacity to transform socio-economic relations (e.g., Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017; Drury & Reicher, 2005). For instance, Khatun, a tiger widow who lost her husband at a very early age, was one of the first to raise her voice against the violence *bagh bidhwas* face from the community. She quipped: “*Did I ask the tiger to kill my husband? Why should I then suffer?*” Her organisation, *Tagar Mahila Dal*, set up with the support of charities, is working with 120 *bagh bidhwas* to address local mindsets that attribute blame to women for their husbands' death. To raise both environmental and social awareness, members stage street plays imploring local people to plant more trees, reduce their reliance on the Sundarbans and include *bagh bidhwas* in social activities. Khatun has travelled to various countries and received awards from different organisations for her work (see Fig. 3). Khatun shared:

In 2012, I travelled to Coventry to receive an award from Oxfam UK for my work with the tiger widows. In 2016, I went to Copenhagen to join the Climate Summit. Our Prime Minister was present there as well. First time, I talked to the media and met people from other countries. I have also travelled to Japan, Bangkok and Malaysia to create awareness about climate change and the Sundarbans. The Bangladesh government have also honoured me for my work.



Fig. 3. Khatun shows off her accolades.
Source: authors' data (interview conducted in May 2017).

Khatun serves as a role model for other women entrepreneurs in helping them to take steps to change their social circumstances on their own terms (Eyben, Kabeer & Cornwall, 2008). Like Khatun, another empowered woman entrepreneur, Chandra, who is in her fifties (see Fig. 3), graduated from a government college and is now empowering other single (divorced or widowed) women by providing them with training, education and motivation and generating a political mandate for their well-being.



Fig. 3. Chandra in her office, Interview conducted on 6th July, 2017.

However, like other women, Chandra's journey has not been easy. Her father left her and her sisters when she was only twelve as her mother had failed to provide a male heir. Chandra reported:

When my father left my mother with three young daughters, it was my mother's strength and sacrifice that . . . made me determined to do something for those women who were abandoned by their husbands. Thus, unlike my sisters who took government jobs, I started a handicrafts business with seven divorced women. As a Hindu woman from a minority background, things were very difficult for me. Local Muslim males thought that I was radicalising their women. Often, they would leave rubbish or cow dung at my front door. However, I was undeterred. Soon, more and more women started joining my handicraft group Nakshi-Katha. Now, I have 600 members who have received training from my organisation, and some have launched their own business to help other women.

Chandra's narrative is consistent with Tajeddini et al.'s (2017) work that links women's participation in informal sectors such as tourism and handicrafts to their economically and psychologically empowered status. Taken together, these women's micro-acts of defiance and solidarity with similar others are deliberate steps to negotiate an empowered social identity in a milieu that stringently discriminates against women.

For instance, from interviews with four male participants, all working in the hospitality sector, it emerged that their efforts to recruit women to managerial positions were vehemently opposed, especially by the elderly and conservative men. On a positive note, all four male participants are consciously subverting prevalent masculine norms in the occupational context by recruiting women in their establishments, albeit in low-paid jobs. However, in general, it is clear, similar to Gil Arroyo et al.'s (2019) study in the Andean Communities, that while men acknowledge women's disadvantaged position, they are reticent to ameliorate it and even uphold prevalent gender dynamics as an element of their traditional culture.

BAGH BIDHWA ENTREPRENEURS' ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT – A REFLECTION

The empirical framework emerging from the findings illustrates how despite the multi-layered and repeated subordination processes that often converge in women entrepreneurs' lives, they are playing the "triple role" (Moser, 1989, p. 1801), a composite of their reproductive roles, household work, and the productive and societal roles guided by feminine modalities of communal caring and mutuality (Fig. 4). Although women's spiritual beliefs and

the intervention of charities and male family members in their lives contribute to their (dis)empowerment process, they also underpin their entrepreneurial marketing strategies (Fig. 4). For instance, due to prevalent social norms, many women entrepreneurs cannot sell their products in the market, but they counter this by proactively seeking the intervention of their male relatives and charitable associations.

Informed by an epistemological position that acknowledges the disorderliness of women's everyday lives, this study is one of the first to offer an insight into the agency of *bagh bidhwa* entrepreneurs who have been routinely *othered* by their gender, marital status, age and class. Although their narratives underline their victimhood and peripherality, the disempowered, those categorised as moving 'towards achieving empowerment' and 'empowered' are all co-constituting entrepreneurial economy through a mesh of kinship ties and links with other women, and one that is deeply rooted in spiritual and environmental values. Thus, symbolically, the Sundarbans is reified as *Ma Bonobibi* (forest goddess), who lends traction to women's entrepreneurial marketing strategies and empowerment efforts that are interwoven with resistance and compliance with patriarchal norms (see Fig. 4).

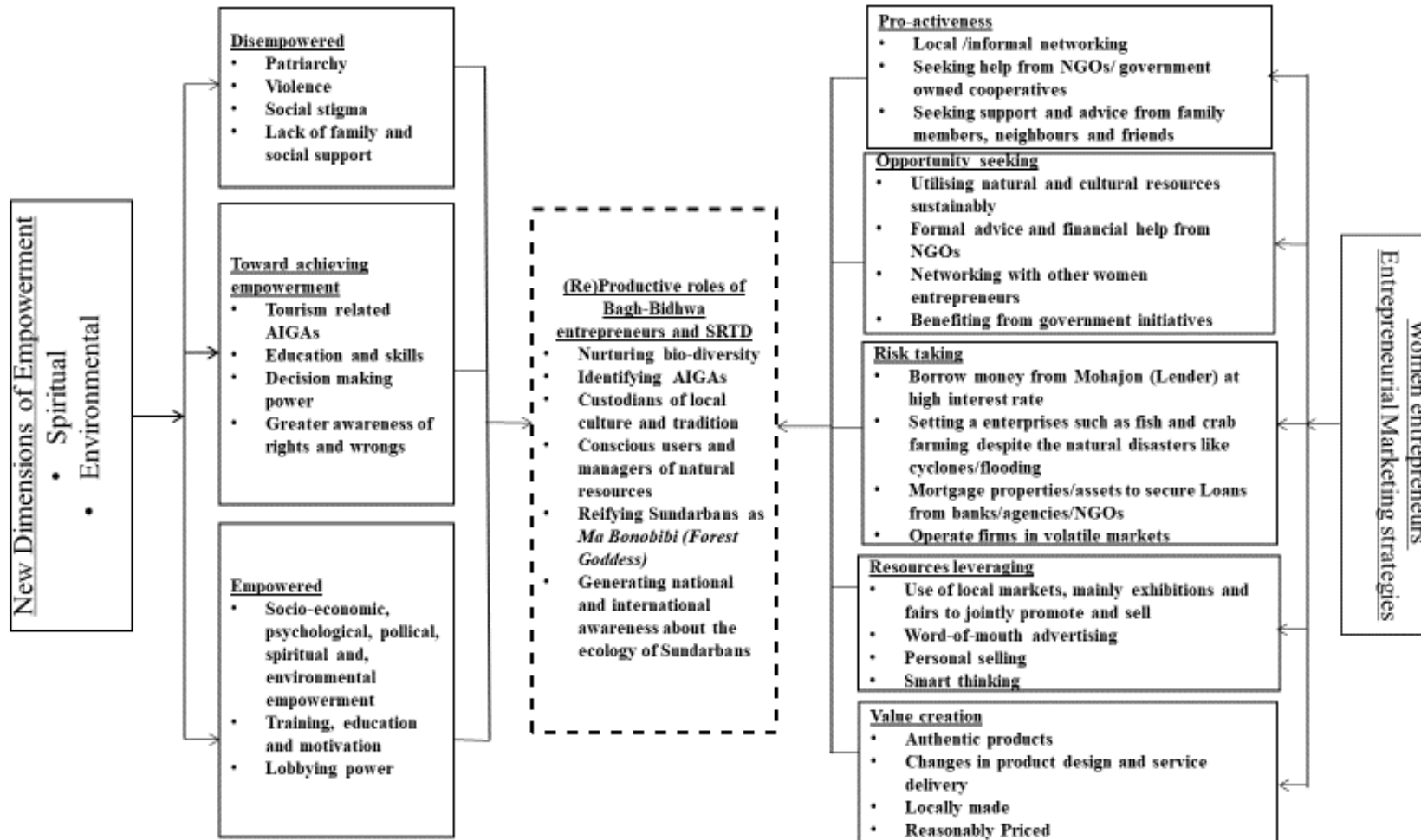


Fig. 4. Bagh bidhwa entrepreneurs' role in Sustainable Rural Tourism Development.

Source: Authors.

The isolated cases of Khatun and Chandra and many other women like them who could not be included in this study point to women's empowerment processes and entrepreneurial drive as decentred, existing in complex contradiction and continual variation and capable of subverting, reimagining and challenging prevalent hierarchies to afford them empowered subjectivities. Indeed, the conception of the intersection of the empowerment and entrepreneurial marketing dimensions allows an insight into how each individual women entrepreneur included in this study is potently working upon and framing the Sundarbans' ecology and tourism economy through spiritual and environmentally sustainable lens. Rather than simply being defined by what they lack and the risks they endure, women's enterprises (albeit missing from the mainstream economic development discourse) are a composite of their proactiveness, opportunity seeking, risk taking, resource leveraging and value creation strategies that underlie their tourism initiatives in the Sundarbans (see Fig. 4).

CONCLUSION

This study provides insights into the impact women entrepreneurs are creating to not only improve their livelihoods and bring value to their households, but also (re)negotiating gendered patriarchal norms in an ongoing and continual process. This study supports previous work which asserts that tourism creates spaces for initiating changes in gender norms (LaPan, et al., 2016, Savage et al., 2021). Yet these are small shifts and incapable of reversing patriarchal forms of domination that are pervasive throughout rural Bangladesh. For instance, women categorised in this study as having an empowered status need to continuously prove themselves with regard to their purity and morality to their families and society simply because they occasionally have to work outside the home.

The pervasiveness of 'objective violence' (see Eger, 2021) inherent in societal norms and status quo in the Sundarbans is not only intimately connected to individual acts of violence, but also internalised by the women themselves. Thus, women who experienced disempowerment viewed empowerment as not being essential for them and accepted their marginal status. Besides, these women and the ones working towards achieving empowerment had a deep-seated perception that men were entitled to better income and status because they were stronger. Hence, any help and support that is offered to women entrepreneurs needs to tackle their societal/familial status at the micro level – i.e., by treating women as individuals and how they offer support to their families, use their enterprises to gain self-esteem and financial independence and, in most cases, supplement the family income (sometimes under duress, but often at their own behest).

Overall, this study makes two distinct theoretical contributions. First, this is one of the few longitudinal studies which demonstrates how women's entrepreneurial marketing strategies can become entwined with and contribute to socio-cultural and economic restructuring processes in the Sundarbans as it embraces tourism economy. Different shades of conventional embodied experience, emotions and affect have been theorised by feminist geographers (see Davidson, 2003; Jupp, 2014). However, few tourism studies apply them in examining women's agency in creating inimitable tourism experiences by continually re-working patriarchy to engage in empowering and intersectional politicking across sites and scales (Figueiredo and Raschi, 2012; Saxena, 2016). Specifically, our work's focus on how different dimensions of women's empowerment and entrepreneurial ventures contribute to the region's unique cultural identity complements emerging research on women's participation in forest co-management initiatives in the Sundarbans (see Begum, Bruyn & Kristiansen, 2022).

Secondly, this study brings together the feminist and socio-cultural contextual critique of entrepreneurs' proactiveness, opportunity seeking, risk taking, resource leveraging and value creation strategies to explore the ". . . micro-financial subjectivities and the complexity of the historical, political and discursive boundaries" (Maclean, 2013, p. 469-470) that women encounter. We noted the impact of women's market-driven individualism composite of risk, responsibility and autonomy (hitherto associated with urban contexts, see Bjerke & Hultman, 2002) in lending traction to tourism focused empowerment initiatives. Yet, it is undeniable women's efforts are tempered by Bangladesh's unique religious-political environment that has conditioned most to accept the status quo. For instance, our participants had no desire to distance themselves from core Islamic values or their culture even when these seemingly tended to work to their disadvantage. The implied nuances of cultural politics that are not discussed in this work constitute an area of further research.

In addition, the specific influencing mechanisms and the hierarchy of the dimensions of empowerment and entrepreneurial marketing need to be further explored and verified through quantitative research. This study reflects on a specific time frame (i.e., prior to Covid-19) which is a key limitation as women's entrepreneurial and empowerment status may have changed vastly as a result of the pandemic. Also, we did not include male participants, particularly those who disapproved of and actively disciplined the conduct of women in "othered" groups (e.g., immigrants and those from other religious and ethnic backgrounds). Future studies should include male views to ascertain the underlying causes and the extent of their opposition. A focus on perspectives of male and female workers outside the tourism industry will further shed light on the community dynamics that both impinge upon and

facilitate rural enterprise. In closing, it is fair to say women's ongoing negotiation of repressive societal practices and policies that lack discursive and analytical conceptions of gender is yet to slacken the hold of heterosexual patriarchy on everyday spaces where they operate.

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