

Original Research Article

# The Role of Ethnic Tourism Development on Gender Equality

## (A Case Study of Baluchis Women's Experience in Sistan and Baluchistan Province, Iran)

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Received: 22/12/2019

Accepted: 15/8/2020

Available online: 22/10/2020

**Abstract** | Ethnic tourism draws attention to the social role of women in traditional ethnic communities. In many traditional ethnic communities, such as Baluchi in Iran, ethnic tourism acts as a window to learn about other cultures. In this type of community, women often have low presence in community, because their responsibilities are usually household issues. While men are responsible for things outside the home such as business and travel, and this issue is also mentioned in Islamic texts. This article examines how ethnic tourism affects gender equality and women's empowerment. The results of this research show that ethnic tourism can have positive effects on gender equality in ethnic communities. The data of this research collected through a field study. Experimental data were obtained the relationship between the local community, tourists and through interviews with a number of women working in tourism-related occupations, and the interview data were analyzed by using grounded theory.

**Keywords** | *Tourism; Gender equality; Women; Ethnic community; Baluchi.*

**Introduction** | This study was conducted in Sistan and Baluchistan province on Baluchi women. Iran has very good potential in the field of ethnic diversity. This country was known as Persian until 1935, which has a long history with the cultural heritage of this land and according to archeological reports, it is more than 7000 years old. So far, 24 cultural-historical and natural monuments of this country have been registered in the World Heritage List. It seems that the economic and social development of Baluchistan, Iran, compared to other parts of the country, and according to the indicators of the Statistics Center of Iran, this province is one of the least developed regions of the country. Among the indicators studied for the development of each region of Iran, Baluchistan has lowest indicators, especially in relation to women's participation in social, cultural, economic and political activities.

Baluchistan of Iran has a relatively low level of social achievements such as economic development, education and especially gender equality indicators. Socially, the Baluch community is still naturally very traditional and tribal, and all affairs are dominated by the tribes and chiefs of the main tribes of the region in terms of political, social and cultural decisions. The cultural and economic structure of the region in relation to the beliefs of the Baloch people has many negative consequences, including the emphasis on internal and class tribal ties, resistance to marriage with non-Baluch people, as well as the preservation of some old traditions (Taheri, 2013). The main purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of ethnic tourism as a strategy for empowering women in traditional ethnic communities. In addition to economic effects, tourism can have different effects on

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communities in terms of improving the quality of life, increasing social interactions and cultural exchanges, and one of the key point which pursued in this research is the effect of ethnic tourism development on gender equality by increasing the connections of the local community with tourists, women will be able to know other cultures.

### Tourism and women

Previous research on tourism and women show that the role of women in economic activity is not fully understood since the social and cultural structure of women have been overlooked in the community (Jafari, 1990, Hall & Kinnaird, 1996). Regarding the conceptual framework of gender perception and its relationship with tourism, there are some steps. First, the processes of tourism start from gender communities and end with the development of gender relations, and then gender relations over time with the development of tourism, the economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental effects in all communities will appear surprisingly. Power, control, and equality in the areas of race, social class, and gender are discussed in tourism development (Swain, 1995). Ethnic tourism activities can be considered as a field of social activities in Sistan and Baluchistan province of Iran that transcends the traditional boundaries of community and helps women in the social spheres of their ethnic group. This study emphasizes how these changes may occur in the context of ethnic community, through the development of ethnic tourism, and also notes that given the nature of the tourism industry, which is based on human relationships with different cultures. The development of tourism due to the increase in social interactions between hosts and guests and the impact they have on each other such as changes in culture and attitudes of the destination community over the time with the increase of incoming tourists to the local community. The development of ethnic tourism in some tourism destinations, such as Latin American countries, has faced a change in family structure. Tourism plays an important role in empowering women politically, culturally, economically and socially, and through the development of sustainable tourism, it can be used to reduce the gender gap, increase the quality of life and well-being of the local community, and reduce discrimination (UNWTO, 2012).

To promote gender equality, support women, and end gender-based violence, the World Tourism Organization (WTO) has emphasized policies to benefit women in tourism through workshops and specialized conferences. Compared to other industries, tourism has

considerable potential in facilitating opportunities for self-employment and income generation, and reducing women's poverty in developing countries. For this reason, tourism as a dynamic industry with economic benefits, while providing increased opportunities for welfare, also promotes the level of gender equality in tourism destinations (Sheikhi, 2015a). In addition to justice and social development, ethnic tourism is also a pioneer in promoting gender equality in ethnic communities. There are many significant correlations between gender equality and traditional ethnic communities, but not studies have been conducted in this area (Peeters & Ateljevic, 2009). The rapid growth of the tourism industry in many parts of the world has led to an increase in suitable job opportunities for women (Mansfeld & Winckler, 2008). In fact, the development of ethnic tourism plays an important role in gender equality, and to design and produce tourism products in accordance with cultural heritage, including handicrafts, popular culture, music or local food, and women enter the lucrative value chain (UNWTO, 2012). Many women have acknowledged that the tourism industry has brought them many benefits such as increasing women's financial independence, decision-making power, and social freedom (Swain, 1995). Unfortunately, women are more victims of poverty than men. In Sistan and Baluchistan province, girls have opportunities to study. As a result, the illiteracy rate among women is higher than men (Taheri, 2013, Flacke-Neudorfer, 2007). In order to create gender equality in ethnic communities such as Sistan and Baluchistan of Iran, more planning should be done on women's empowerment in order to develop ethnic tourism. In fact, with the help of ethnic tourism, a beneficial strategy can be established for women to communicate effectively with women from other cultures who travel as tourists to practice the local culture of the Baluch ethnic group and learn about their lifestyle to raise awareness.

### Research background

Research shows that significant research has not been done on the issue of gender equality in ethnic communities, and therefore has doubled the importance of conducting this qualitative research in a traditional ethnic community. The main points of some similar research briefly explained as follow:

Mahdavi Nia, (2012) women in tourism play a key role as they are half of the human resources in the tourism sector in the world and in Iran are women and the relationship between the role of women in tourism development in determining the target market and gender of tourists. The target market also deals with the fact that tourists are divided into two groups of men and women, and

according to the conditions of Iran due to special religious, cultural, and social characteristics of incoming female tourists and tourism industry employees in general in their research on the importance of female population in tourism explained.

In their case study, Imeni, Khani & Hashemi (2012) figure out that rural women in the past participated in many activities alongside men and in recent years due to social, economic and cultural developments, their activities have decreased. Hence, they refer to the tourism industry as an activity that has a variety of job opportunities for women entrepreneurship. Finally, based on the results of their research, they show that the of tourism in rural areas has created many opportunities for women to work and has turned the rural environment into a stimulating and motivating environment for women entrepreneurship. The natures of tourism industry provide possibility of part-time job opportunities for women which are the best for women in traditional ethnic groups.

### **Ethnic tourism and Sistan and Baluchistan province**

Ethnic groups usually do not have a good economic situation, but they are very rich culturally and have cultural originality that can be considered as a source for the development of ethnic tourism (Theerapappisit, 2009). These cultural characteristics of ethnic groups are the fundamental potential for the development of the region, as a tourist destination (Sheikhi, 2015a). In fact, ethnic tourism, given the ethnic diversity of Sistan and Baluchistan province can be used as a suitable tool for regional development and diversification of economic businesses. In recent years, the government has paid more attention to the potential of ethnic groups, including the annual calendar of national ethnic festivals held in Golestan province with the active participation of all Iranian ethnic groups (MCTH, 2020). Currently, the flow of ethnic tourism in Sistan and Baluchistan province, as the first region in the southeast of the Iran has been growing. The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of ethnic tourism on gender equality through interaction of tourists with local ethnic groups. The main reasons that the researcher has chosen this region of Iran as a case study are as follows: a) Baluchi women have low social participation in the social, cultural, political and economic fields compared to other ethnic groups in Iran, b) there are many cultural and social restrictions for women in this region) the old traditions of the ethnic group still alive in Sistan and Baluchistan province) there is a traditional attitude towards women in this region. Therefore, according to the issues raised, there is a lot of potential for the development of ethnic

tourism in Sistan and Baluchistan province of Iran, and this is the only effective mechanism to balance and change the attitude of men towards women in the context of traditional community. Sistan and Baluchistan may be in an unfavorable economic and social structure, but the rich culture of the region must be acknowledged as a huge asset, providing countless opportunities for tourism activities. Baluch ethnic group culturally are rich, but economically are poor and options for economic development are limited, so tourism is suitable field for economic development based on cultural tourism planning. Sistan and Baluchistan currently has three world heritage monuments, including Shahre Sokhteh, Lut Desert, and Kalpurgan village, which can be considered as tourist attractions. Through ethnic tourism by designing a comprehensive program that pursues a sustainable approach for economic, social, and cultural change with the aim of developing human characteristics and creating welfare for all groups and women and men and children (Yang & Wall, 2009; Yang & Li, 2012). This research states that ethnic tourism is a unique form of providing opportunities for gender equality in traditional ethnic communities. The interactions between hosts and guests can inspire women and encourage them to work, earn more money and break down the boundaries created by traditional community. This is why tourism can have a positive effect on improving the quality of life and giving women the chance to be associated with more socially equitable aspects (Jafari, 1990). Gender equality is different in each society and most of the existing studies that have focused on the impact of tourism on women have not addressed the non-economic factors that affect gender roles and the complexity of gender relations in traditional communities (Swain, 1993). In ethnic tourism, gender relations in the host community are a key factor because they influence how power and identity are created. Because ethnic tourism strives to achieve equal, active, and empowered women, it needs to be based on an understanding of local gender roles. Baluchistan is known as the main part of Sistan and Baluchistan province. This province is one of the thirty-one provinces of Iran and is located in the southeast of the country and has common borders with Pakistan and Afghanistan. This province with an area of 181758 square kilometers is the largest province of Iran (Spooner, 1967). The province consists of two parts: Sistan in the north and Baluchistan in the south. In Persian, Baluchistan means the land of the Baluch (Afrakhteh, 2006). According to the life cycle of tourism products, Baluchistan is in the exploration stage. Thus, the number of tourists is small and the tourism infrastructure is limited (Butler, 1980), Sistan and Baluchistan also in the stage of welcoming

tourists (Doxey, 1975). In addition, Baluchis offering variety of local services such as guest accommodation, traditional local foods, local tour guide, handicrafts, and local music. These features are more evident in Baluchistan of Iran than other ethnic groups in Iran (Ebrahimi, 2012, 3).

## Research Methods

To collect the data of this research, field method as the main tool and during the field activity in Sistan and Baluchistan province, various special methods such as semi-structured face-to-face interviews with women working in related activities. The field observations in the villages during the NowRuz and guest and host relationship used to analyze the interview data. Due to the lack of fluency of Baluch women in Persian, the interviews were conducted in Baluchi language. Each interview was between 30 to 50 minutes. Some Baluchis women accepted to collaborate in this research. The main researcher them that their name will remain anonymous in order to cooperate and presenting the facts of their own community about their own activities in tourism. Grounded theory used to analyze the interview data. Using this theory, we started with a field of study, and in the process, the desired results were obtained from the data. In addition, visual data, including photography, was gathered during all stages of the fieldwork. The results of this study have been routed through ethnic tourism to understand gender equality in the context of traditional society. The main purpose of this study is to investigate how the development of ethnic tourism affects the lives of Baluchi women in Sistan and Baluchistan province and to identify the opportunities that ethnic tourism provides for women. The data of this study were collected from twelve interviews with women working in jobs related to ethnic tourism. The interviewees were selected from different tribes in the villages that have tourists in Sistan and Baluchistan province. Eight of these women were married and four were single. In addition, among the eight of married women, six had children and two samples had no children. This diversity was politicized to cover the diversity of views and experiences. And the education of these women mostly up to middle school level and 5 cases were illiterate and women without education had more than 30 years of part-time activity in handicraft production jobs and in recent years in addition to producing handicrafts compared to the road Ecotourism houses were set up with the cooperation of men in their community and are also involved in cooking and serving traditional food. From an early age, young women learned how to handicrafts from their mothers and had professional experience of one to 15 years in ethnic tourism-related occupations. All interviews were recorded

with the permission of the interviewees, and at the end of each day, the interviews were and then coded. In the analysis process, three coding steps have been performed according to the theory (initial coding, centralized coding and theoretical coding). The initial coding step involves naming the data using line-by-line coding. In the initial codes, the focus was on identifying the data and using the relevant data, and then in the coding, the identification of the best keywords related to the research topic was aimed, and then the data were described in this research.

## Analysis of research findings:

According to the research, the data are classified and presented in two general themes: The first one is the development of ethnic tourism with the aim of creating job opportunities for women to help families. The second one refers to the development of tourism with the aim of positive social change to achieve gender equality over time.

### • Tourism opportunities for Baluchi women

According to the field observations of the main researcher of this study in most urban and rural areas of Sistan and Baluchistan province, women have a very low presence in social and economic activities and are subject to the policies of men in the community and can only see women in the community through the arts crafts for tourists (Fig. 1).

Therefore, according to the results of the analysis of interviews with women, they clearly indicated that they have no role in the community other than the production of handicrafts that have root in intangible cultural heritage of the region. Baluchi women, with extraordinary skill, have been able to a unique reputation beyond the borders of their traditional community with their handicrafts, and through this, they have crossed the traditional borders of their community. Government programs have so far failed to influence the traditional structure of the region for empowering women. One



Fig. 1. Baluchi woman painting a pottery with natural color. Source: CHHT, Sistan & Baluchistan, 2018.

of the key points mentioned by one of the handicraft artists: "Baluchi women do not have any presence in the community, but their handicrafts are available and sold in all handicrafts and tourism exhibitions at the provincial, national and international levels."

Through the tourism industry, the role of women in the social and economic spheres can be understood. In fact, the progress for women in traditional cultures such as Sistan and Baluchistan province is much more difficult than other ethnic groups in Iran. In addition, the issue of women in Baluch ethnic group is problematic because of the existing traditional attitudes regarding the role of women in the community. But with the growth of tourism in ethnic communities such as Sistan and Baluchistan province, there are many opportunities for gender equality and social relations. With the boom in tourism, social, cultural, and economic opportunities provided for Baluchi women. Ethnic tourism them the opportunity to be financially independent to support their family too. According to another woman, tourism reduces financial dependence on men in the Baluchi community. The women interviewed considered tourism as an opportunity for employment to have economic independent and stressed the importance of its development, noting that this is the only area where their men are allowed to work in the handicraft sector and provide local food.

#### • Social and cultural consequences

Due to its special nature, which is based on the relationship between human beings different cultures, tourism has both positive and negative consequences. The social and cultural impacts of ethnic tourism include all the ways that change the family structure and relationships, collective lifestyle, awareness level of community, moral behavior, traditional rituals and community organizations. Therefore, the result of such relations between the guest and the host is the socio-cultural effects that are formed between tourists and the Baluch ethnic group as a result of ethnic tourism. The nature of these relationships is a major factor influencing the perceptions or misunderstandings created by tourism development. Ethnic tourism as a social and cultural activity has a potential for social changes and breaking the Cultural boundaries of traditional Baluch. Ethnic tourism in the context of ethnic culture such as Baluchis, must be accompanied by planning and monitoring to avoid social change and culture should not destroy the originality of people.

"We are happy that tourists from different cultures come to our area and we can get to know their culture," one handicraft artist said in an interview. According to the national dynamics of tourism development in Sistan and Baluchistan province, the necessary opportunity to change the traditional structure of the Baluchi

community to be able women of this region from the traditions has been provided and today with the expansion of social networks and increasing tourists, significant changes is taking place. Most of the women activists in the field of tourism stated in interviews that the business opportunities of Baluchi women outside the family are limited and sometimes unacceptable, and from the perspective of the Baluchi community, the only field that they can enter without cultural challenges is handicrafts production. They have activities in the fields of handicraft production and cooking local food of the region to receive tourists, and in this regard, Baluchi men also provide the necessary support to women. It should also be noted that Baluchi women are practically unable to work full-time children and the difficulty of housework, and therefore Baluchi women are more inclined to work in seasonal businesses such as tourism. In addition, the development of ethnic tourism in the context of ethnic communities, through the expansion of domestic tourism flows, provides the ground for interaction with other ethnic groups in the country and in this regard can help centralism and strengthen the unity of a country. Another woman working in the field of tourism in Sistan and Baluchistan province stated that "seeing different people and facing new situations provides an opportunity for Baluchi women to learn about the rights of women of other Iranian ethnic groups, and since most Baluchi women produce handicrafts and arts in their homes, boosting direct sales and boosting women's sense of financial independence."

Ethnic tourism has the potential to provide an opportunity for women to feel that they play an important role in their community because of their work in the tourism industry, and Baluchi women feel that their work in the field of handicrafts plays a significant role in the development of Sistan and Baluchistan province of Iran. In addition, with their activities in ethnic tourism, they feel that they are promoting and introducing the culture of their region. According to the observations of the first author of this research, women who started their part-time work in the field of tourism activities they provided for themselves and their families some financial independence. Baluch men gave them the freedom to participate outside the home and in provincial, regional, national and international exhibitions. Many of these examples can see when you talk to these successful Baluchi women; it is precisely this complex and difficult process that they have been able to bring to this level of success from the traditional atmosphere of community. They owe themselves to their own art, which includes their own delicate art. Pottery in Kalpouregan workshop, needlework, etc. has been able to find the path of growth and excellence (Fig. 2).

Ethnic tourism, due to its specialized nature, which provides the ground for tourists to enter the traditional context of traditional community and experience the local culture closely, so it has the power to overcome the negative traditions of the past over time in community. The idea of developing ethnic tourism in Iran's Sistan and Baluchistan province is a new way to highlight the role of women in traditional community and plays an important role in helping them overcome traditional stereotypes. The number of working women in Sistan and Baluchistan province is very small compared to other provinces in the social sphere, and the only place in which women participate in economic activities is part-time in home workshops and small-scale tourism businesses. The findings of this study are very encouraging in this regard because it shows that increasing employment opportunities for women, leads to the development and facilitation of gender equality and social development in this region of Iran. This study also improves understanding of the role of women in ethnic and tourism groups. To this end, ethnic tourism, if accompanied by continuous planning, monitoring, and evaluation can lead to positive social change and women have access to their basic rights. This study looks at the development of ethnic tourism in Baluchi ethnic and states that ethnic tourism is a suitable tool for the development of this province, which has ethnic diversity and the originality of the region that still can see match of the pattern of hospitality in the region especially when it comes to the role of women in ethnic communities. Further research should be on the claim that due to traditions, the voice of Baluch women is not heard and the only way to interact with different cultures and hear their voice is through ethnic tourism. Tourism helps minority groups by internationalizing their political and social images. Ethnic tourism will not only have a positive impact on social and cultural development, but also economic development. Based on the field findings of this study, there are many people who come to Baluchistan



Fig. 2. A Baluchi women working in national handicrafts exhibition. Source: CHHT, Sistan & Baluchistan, 2018.

from other provinces for jobs such as teachers or other government agencies, and the presence of these non-Baluchi residents in changing the attitude of women in the region towards gender equality and tourism. According to the results of this study, shows the mentality of Baluchi women towards the impact of the development of tourism in Baluchistan, Iran.

The results showed the ways through which the development of ethnic tourism can improve the situation of women in Sistan and Baluchistan province and have positive effects on the economic and social development of this province. According to the field observations of the first author of the research, Baluchi culture is traditional. On the other hand, Sistan and Baluchistan province have very few economic opportunities and therefore, sustainable tourism with an ethnic approach can increase business opportunities for Baluchi women, who are less allowed to work outside the home due to tradition.

### Conclusion

According to the research background in ethnic tourism literature, limited studies have investigated the role of ethnic tourism development in gender equality in the structure of ethnic communities. It is the province of Sistan and Baluchistan that empowers women to participate in economic and social activities, as well as to establish a balance between men and women, through ethnic tourism and communication between guests and hosts in the context of the traditional community. In fact, the traditional culture of Sistan and Baluchistan province has a great impact on the role of women in the social, economic, and cultural roles of women. Due to the strong culture and traditions of the region, women are rarely allowed to work outside the home to earn money, and all economic activities are the responsibility of men in the region, and women busy with housework. They are in charge of the artwork inside the house and care of the children. In the Baluchi, women must seek permission from their husbands, fathers, or brothers to be able to engage in economic, social and cultural activities outside the home, and to maintain family honor, in accordance with ethnic traditions, to be well-known and to avoid any shame. Possibly, they are completely under the control of the men of their own community. The approach to the development of ethnic tourism as an option for positive social change provides an opportunity for women in the Baluchi community to become aware of their rights through their empowerment and to improve their quality of life. In addition, the women interviewed made it clear that they were interested in learning about other cultures and the rights of women in other cultures. Furthermore, they stated that through interaction with tourists, they would become aware of the lifestyles of other

women in different cultures and cause them to oppose their own traditional cultural customs, such as the polygamy of Baluch men. This positive view of Baluchi women working in the field of tourism in Sistan and Baluchistan Province of Iran was related to a number of issues raised in the interviews. The first is that the economic importance of ethnic tourism for the Baluchi people is seen as an opportunity for economic development. The second is that Baluch women want to promote Baluch handicrafts, and since their artwork is unique in Iran, this is an opportunity to provide employment for women. The third discussion is about raising awareness of Baluch men about women's rights. This study clearly shows that the interaction of the Baluchi with tourists through the development of ethnic

tourism leads to an improvement in their quality of life as a host community. According to the field observation, in the target villages of tourism where women interact with tourists more, have more freedom of action, and growth indicators in the field of gender equality can be observed to some extent. Ethnic tourism also causes Baluchi women to break the cycle of poverty in their region through formal and informal employment, entrepreneurship and education. Therefore, this study proved that ethnic tourism has a positive effect on promoting women's empowerment and their rights. In short, the development of ethnic tourism is a vital and feasible solution to reduce the gender gap in traditional ethnic communities such as Sistan and Baluchistan province.

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#### HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Sheikhi, A.; Ebrahimian, S. & Vazin, N. (2020). The Role of Ethnic Tourism Development on Gender Equality (A Case Study of Baluchis Women's Experience in Sistan and Baluchistan Province, Iran). *Tourism of Culture*, 1(2), 47-54.

DOI: 10.22034/toc.2020.241614.1009

URL: [http://www.toc-sj.com/article\\_115505\\_en.html](http://www.toc-sj.com/article_115505_en.html)

