

Original Research Article

The Role of Women's Empowerment in Ecotourism Development

(Case Study: Kordan Village in Karaj)*

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Abstract | Tourism is one of the most dynamic economic activities of the current era, which plays an important role in sustainable local development. This industry, on the one hand, provides leisure time, and on the other hand, leads to the development and growth of less developed areas and the spread of culture and religion in different regions. Cultural tourism, as one of the types of tourism, plays a significant role in the dissemination of the indigenous and national cultures of different lands and cultures. One of the cultural attractions in the world is the traditional clothing of different nations, which reflects the national and cultural identity, rituals, and customs, and shows the ways they can be distinguished from those in other nations of the world. This article aims to examine the position of traditional clothing, which is one of the most important factors affecting the tourism industry. For this purpose, it analyzes the traditional clothing of Iranian ethnic groups and scrutinizes its cultural and artistic impact on attracting tourists. The present study seeks to answer the question of how the traditional clothing of Iranian ethnic groups can contribute to the development of cultural tourism in Iran? This research is applied and uses the descriptive-analytical-survey method. The data collection methods included library and field research. Data from the field was collected through interviews with 40 researchers and experts in the field of tourism. The validity and reliability of the study were established through Cronbach's test and snowball sampling. The research hypothesis was based on the positive effect of traditional Iranian clothing in various dimensions and methods on cultural tourism. Analysis of the opinions of experts and researchers shows that the traditional clothing of Iranian ethnic groups is an important element in defining cultural identity in five sections: cultural relations, international tourism cooperation, introduction and supply of traditional clothing, advertising and dissemination of indigenous culture, can be identified and expanded as one of the most effective cultural attractions in the cultural tourism industry in Iran.

Keywords | *Tourism, Sustainable ecotourism, Women empowerment, Kordan Village.*

Introduction | Today, it is impossible for a country to achieve its development goals without the cooperation of the female population. The status of women in a

country reveals the level of development. According to many studies, women play a key role in developing various communities (Moghni Damghani, Bagheri & Moghni Damghani, 2015). Communities should make several fundamental changes in their policies to achieve sustainable development. These changes require the active and conscious participation of all individuals, especially women. Women play a significant role in families and

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societies. They can undertake serious responsibilities to accelerate changes and achieve sustainable development goals. Therefore, they must be fully aware of their crucial importance (Zahedi, 2006).

In many developing countries, women are the first individuals to shoulder the burden of responsibility and double their productive activities to combat serious environmental menaces such as soil erosion, drought, and deforestation. Environmental advocates, governments, and international organizations must understand the central role of women in protecting the environment; otherwise, they will lose one of their important allies (Elliott, 1999).

Several social and cultural barriers as well as many gender role expectations prevent women's active participation in environmental affairs. To remove these barriers, the "Woman in Development" approach was replaced by the "Gender and Development" approach in the 1980s. Subsequently, many third-world countries adopted certain strategies to boost the practical participation of women in the development process (Ketabi, Farokhi & Yazdkhasti, 2003). A strategy of this type emphasizes the fact that participation does not simply imply enjoying the benefits of development programs; however, women must be actively involved in the execution of development plans and projects. Accordingly, women can be empowered by eliminating barriers to their participation and increasing their capabilities (*ibid.*).

Women empowerment and participation can help different countries develop their human resources, manage their talents, attain their development and international goals, and eliminate poverty in their rural and urban populations (Bandiera et al., 2012). It is impossible for a country to achieve sustainable development without empowering the female population. The empowered women are able to make basic changes in different sectors by playing a more active role in all domains (Khosravi Pour & Khorrooshani, 2011). Known as one of the world's fastest-growing and most profitable economic sectors (Font & Ahjem, 1999), the tourism industry is considered an effective development strategy. In fact, tourism development requires the cooperation of local communities to boost both national and local developments.

Local communities are the key stakeholders in developing sustainable tourism; therefore, special attention must be paid to their current and future demands as well as their participation while formulating development plans. Equal empowerment and fair distribution of power are the two major components of sustainable development. Participation alone does not guarantee sustainable tourism development; however, local people must also be empowered (Cheavens, 2000). Ecotourism is a rapidly developing form of tourism that has received a great deal of attention in recent years. It provides new economic

opportunities for local communities by creating jobs, protecting biodiversity, developing cultural interactions, extending environmental education and knowledge, and generating revenues. The development of ecotourism can increase the local community's welfare and income levels while preserving the environment and social traditions. Therefore, ecotourism can be considered the main tool for promoting sustainable development. In community-based ecotourism, the participation of the local community is the most important component of sustainable ecotourism development (Ziaei, Ghorbani & Amin-Beidokht, 2015). Many projects and plans have failed because of ignoring the needs and strengths of local people, especially those of women. In fact, women play an effective role in expanding various economic, social, and agricultural sectors. Furthermore, women's empowerment is associated with people's quality of life and the issues of basic human rights. The issue of women's empowerment has not been seriously examined in many countries. Many ecotourism development plans have been unsuccessfully implemented in Iran. Poor participation and insufficient empowerment of local people (especially women) are probably the main reasons for the failure of such plans (Ghanbari & Mahmoud Salehi, 2015). Kordan is a village located in Koohsar City, Savojbolagh County, and Alborz Province, Iran. Kordan has great potential for the development of ecotourism due to its beautiful natural, historical, and religious attractions and its proximity to important factories, Karaj Metropolis, and the Tehran-Qazvin Highway. The vast farming lands, diverse orchards, abundant rivers, pleasant weather, and beautiful nature of Kordan lay the ground for the development of ecotourism. Considering the crucial role of women in families (as wives and mothers) and society, this study aimed to analyze the effects of women's empowerment on sustainable ecotourism development in the study area.

Research Background

Numerous studies have so far analyzed various dimensions of the issue of empowerment and women empowerment worldwide. Some scholars have also adopted different approaches to address issues such as ecotourism and natural tourism spaces. This section presents a review of the relevant studies on the research subject. In a study entitled "Factors Affecting Women Empowerment with an Emphasis on the Tourism Sector (Case Study: Sisakht City)", Ghanbari and Mahmoud Salehi (2015) observed that for the women of Sisakht, the most important factors affecting women empowerment included economic, participatory, sociocultural, and infrastructural factors, respectively. Considering the role of the economy on job creation and income level, they recognized the economic factor as the most important factor. Barimani, Nikmanesh

and Khodaverdiloo (2012) conducted a study entitled *The Role of Microcredit in the Empowerment of Rural Women (Case Study: Lakestan Rural District, Salmas County)*. Based on their findings, microcredit significantly empowered the studied women, as the women who had received loans were economically more empowered and emotionally more confident than those who had not.

In another study entitled *The Role of Tourism in the Empowerment of Rural Women (Case Study: Emamzadeh Bazm Village, Fars Province and Javaher Deh Village, Mazandaran Province)*, Amiri (2011) concluded that tourism neither generally nor socially empowered the studied women. However, tourism development empowered the studied women in Javaher Deh Village economically. Finally, the participants in both villages were empowered psychologically.

In his research entitled *Assessing the role of rural tourism in empowering rural women, a case study: Deh Ziarat village in Bavanat city of Fars province, Heidari Sarban and Maleki (2014)* concluded that sustainable development goals would be impossible without women. Hajian (2013) conducted *The Effect of Winter Tourism Development on Economic Empowerment of Rural Women (Case Study: Tourist Destinations of Khur, Shemshak, Darband Sar, and Dizin)* and concluded that the development of winter tourism, as a major rural development strategy, would provide women living in mountainous areas with many opportunities and empowers them economically.

Roknodin Eftekhari, Purtaheri, Farajzade and Heidari Sarban (2009) analyzed the effect of empowerment on agricultural development in rural areas of Ardabil Province. They observed that level of agricultural development in the selected villages had strong positive relationships with the dimensions of self-determination, competence, and impact; however, no significant relationships were observed among other dimensions. The variable of farmer empowerment was found to be generally associated with agricultural development in the study area.

Spreitzer (1995) conducted *Psychological Empowerment in the Workplace: Dimensions, Measurement, and Validation in the US*. According to the results, the main factors affecting empowerment include individual factors (including education, work experience, gender, race, and self-esteem), group factors (including group effectiveness, group importance, and intragroup trust), and organizational and social factors (including role ambiguity, access to resources, locus of control, access to information, social and political support, and participatory atmosphere). In her study, Barry (2012) analyzed women's roles in bridging the existing environmental, economic, and social gaps in the development of sustainable tourism. She stated that education and empowerment could help women become leaders in the protection of sociocultural

and environmental values. Bansal and Kumar (2011) conducted *Women Empowerment and Self-Sustainability through Tourism: A Case Study of Self-Employed Women in Handicraft Sector in Kullu Valley of Himachal Pradesh*. They measured the income that the studied women obtained by selling handicrafts and highlighted the effect of women's empowerment and support on product quality and supply. In their study on the psychological empowerment of rural women, Steiner and Farmer (2018) concluded that the process of community empowerment would start with partnership and follow with participation. They also argued that several limitations would prevent community members from adopting community empowerment policies, suggesting that even suitable community empowerment programs might eventually fail. Osman & Tanner (2017) analyzed the psychological empowerment of rural women. According to their findings, various constructs of psychological empowerment include intrapersonal factors, behavioral factors, and interactional factors. They also observed that the provision of computer services and training could psychologically empower low-income community members. In addition, their findings can improve our understanding of the relationships among different components of psychological empowerment.

The conceptual research model was developed based on the above discussions (Fig. 1).

Theoretical foundations

• Ecotourism

Ecotourism is a form of rural tourism, which is being increasingly accepted as a poverty reduction strategy in many developing countries. The sustainability of this type of tourism is of great importance. Sustainable ecotourism attempts to protect environmental and cultural assets, create job opportunities, generate income, and enhance local community participation. Regarding ecotourism, human resources are far more important than accommodation and residential facilities; hence, ecotourism development requires awareness, knowledge, and participation of the local community as well as the fulfillment of indigenous people's needs rather than heavy investment and infrastructure. An essential principle of sustainable development is to improve the knowledge and participation of local communities in development programs. Participation requires the empowerment of human resources. In today's world, countries with greater and more up-to-date knowledge can better empower their human resources, thereby obtaining additional benefits from development (Roknodin Eftekhari, Pourtaheri & Fazli, 2014). Considered a huge portion of a country's workforce, women can play a critical role in the advancement of major goals and policies of planners in social, cultural, and economic areas. Given the important

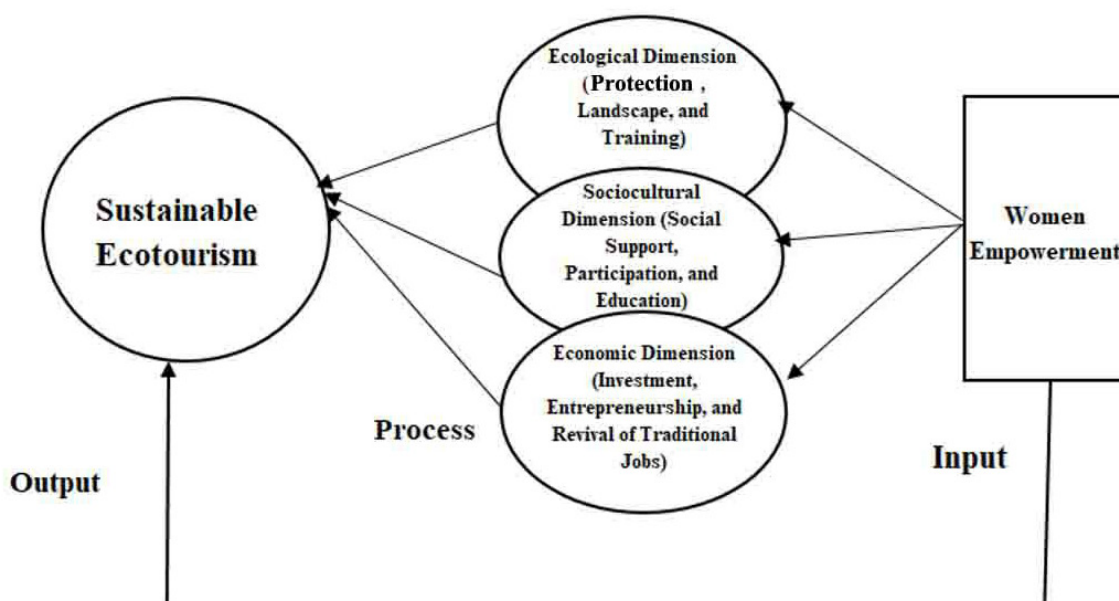


Fig. 1. Conceptual research model. Source: Authors.

role of women in the management of family affairs, their knowledge and information can affect the public culture. Women can also play key societal roles such as educators, promoters, and nature advocates. Women empowerment can substantially boost the development of ecotourism and ecotourism destinations. Training and awareness are essential elements of empowerment as they enable local people to accept or make new changes (Safari Shali, 2008). Empowerment aims to prepare women to be actively involved in all regional issues along with men and to prepare the ground for sustainable development.

The authors analyzed the economic, sociocultural, and environmental dimensions of women empowerment:

- **Economic dimension:** This dimension is defined by indicators/abilities such as earning or generating higher income levels, repaying loans, and saving money (Shakouri, Rafat Jah & Jafari, 2007). According to Sadler's sustainable ecotourism model proposed in 1990, economic goals include economic benefits for the host community and economic stability (Sadler 1990 cited in Zahedi, 2006).

- **Sociocultural dimension:** The social dimension of empowerment consists of indicators of having social presence and participation, being respected by others, and establishing relationships with other societies and social entities. The cultural dimension involves the protection or development of women's culture. Based on the sustainable ecotourism goals (Baromey, 2008), the socio-cultural dimension of empowerment consists of indicators such as promoting active participation of local people, empowering local people, maintaining the balance of the local community, encouraging the concept of

multiculturalism, improving communication among the host community and tourists, and creating a sense of self-esteem among local people.

- **Environmental dimension:** In developing countries, women usually manage the health and nutrition of families, and assume responsibility for supplying water, food, and fuel; therefore, they tend to put their knowledge of environmental protection and natural resources into practice (Ghanbari & Mahmoud Salehi, 2015). Evidence suggests that women are more environmentally aware than men. They are also more involved in environmental protection activities such as waste recycling and reuse and conscious purchase of eco-friendly goods. According to some ecofeminists, women's knowledge of nature has historically contributed to the survival of mankind (Akbari, 2012). The environmental objectives of Sadler's sustainable ecotourism model (1990) include preserving local resources, avoiding resource degradation, and managing the supply and demand of natural resources (Sadler 1990 cited in Zahedi, 2006).

Figure 2 presents various indicators of women empowerment for the economic, sociocultural, and environmental dimensions.

• **Indicator concepts**

- **Economic dimension**

Entrepreneurship: Entrepreneurship has great positive effects on human mood and behavior. Examples of such effects include personality development, socialization, and the formation of a suitable life structure (Tabatabaie Yahya Abadi & Hosseinian, 2005). The pull (positive) and push (negative) factors were considered in the entrepreneurial

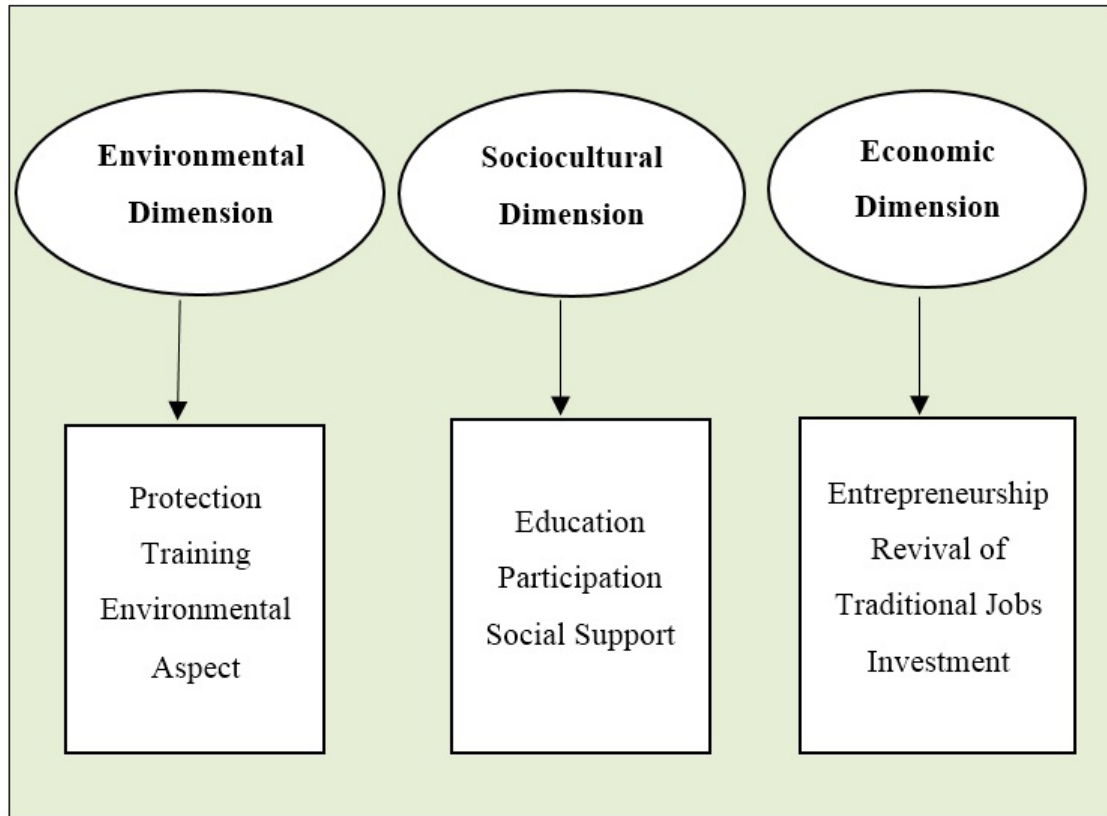


Fig. 2. Indicators of women empowerment. Source: Authors.

process for entrepreneurial incentives. Negative factors are urgent factors that encourage women to pursue their business ideas. These factors include unemployment, frustration with ex-jobs, the need to live a reasonable life with a flexible work schedule, and a family tradition of work management (Petridou & Glavelis, 2008).

Investment: The financial investment of various institutes (e.g. banks, private companies, insurance companies, real estate investment funds, and private equity funds) can contribute to the development of tourism projects.

Revival of traditional jobs: Employment in a community rises if people buy the goods and products produced inside the community. At the same time, employment rates fall when imported goods replace domestically produced products. Given the special features of traditional arts and handicrafts (e.g. no need for heavy investment), relevant authorities can utilize the existing facilities in areas of domestic sales and exports to strongly support the production of local handicrafts.

- Sociocultural dimension

Participation: Participation consists of subjective and objective aspects. The subjective aspect refers to people's mental and psychological preparedness for social participation, whereas the objective aspect depends on the participatory behaviors of individuals in their daily lives.

Education: In this study, many respondents were highly

educated. According to some respondents, training can replace education.

Social Support: Social support refers to the amount of love, help, and attention that people receive from their family members, friends, and others. People with strong relationships at different social levels (e.g. social networks, and groups) can benefit from a variety of emotional, instrumental, and informational supports.

- Environmental Dimension

Protection: Today, environmental protection is considered a basic component of sustainable development worldwide. Protection cannot be achieved without the conscious participation of people. In addition, the lack of public awareness about environmental issues is among the major causes of environmental degradation and pollution. Given the crucial role of women in today's life, they can considerably affect the environment. Women are directly involved in agricultural activities in many parts of the world, especially in rural areas; therefore, they are in direct contact with the environment and environmental issues. They play a central role in agriculture, animal husbandry, water supply (especially in desert areas), cultivation of home gardens, and household consumption. Accordingly, they have a huge impact on the environment as well as the optimal use of resources (Akbari, 2012).

Landscape: Landscape is a general term that is associated

with nature, culture, history, cities, villages, and other objective phenomena. It is an objective, subjective, dynamic, and relative phenomenon and the product of interactions between "human and nature" as well as "society and history" (Mansouri, 2008 cited in Parchekani, Hashemi, Roknodin Eftekhari & Imani Khoshkhoo, 2018). This indicator includes the components of conservation of natural resources, segregation of dry and wet wastes, conservation of water resources, and protection of native animals.

Training: Providing villagers with proper training substantially improves their environmental knowledge and capabilities, thereby fostering the culture of environmental protection in rural areas.

Study area

According to Iran's latest National Census of Population and Housing (2016), Kordan Village has a population of 3795 people, out of whom 1883 individuals are women. Due to its beautiful nature, historical, and religious attractions (e.g. Shahzade Hossein and Bibi Sakineh Shrines), the village attracts many tourists each year. In Kordan, women actively participate in social activities while fulfilling their role as mothers and wives; however, they generally ignore their role in development affairs and have a poor sense of belonging to the area.

Research method

In this applied descriptive-analytical survey, the data were collected using the desk and field (questionnaire) methods. Variables of "ecotourism development" and "economic, sociocultural, and environmental empowerment" were considered as the dependent and independent research variables, respectively. The study population consisted of all local people living in Kordan Village, Iran (N = 3795), among whom 348 individuals were selected using Cochran's sample size formula (95% confidence level). After excluding those with incomplete questionnaires, the final sample size was determined as 300. A questionnaire was designed based on the research literature and indicators identified in the previous section. The items were scored on a five-point Likert scale. The reliability of the measurement tool was assessed using Cronbach's alpha method. As shown in Table 1, the obtained Cronbach's alpha values indicated desirable reliability of the scale. In addition, the validity of the questionnaire was assessed and confirmed using expert opinions.

Findings

• Descriptive findings

As presented in Table 2, nearly 58% of all the participants were male. The majority of the participants were between 26– 35 years-old (Table 3). According to Table 4, the majority of the participants had bachelor's degrees. Table

5 indicates that the majority of the participants had service jobs. Table 6 reports the number, mean, standard deviation (SD), minimum (Min), and maximum (Max) of the research variables.

The normality of the variables was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test, and all of them had normal distributions because their significance level was > 0.05 (Table 7).

Research dimensions

According to Table 8, for the environmental dimension, the obtained t-value was 3.906 and the respective p-value (0.000) was smaller than 0.05; hence, the environmental dimension of women empowerment positively affects ecotourism development. For the sociocultural dimension, the obtained t-value was 3.894 and the respective p-value (0.000) was smaller than 0.05; thus, the sociocultural dimension of women empowerment has a positive effect on ecotourism development. Finally, for the economic dimension, the obtained t-value was 4.303 and the respective p-value (0.000) was smaller than 0.05; therefore, the economic dimension of women empowerment positively influences ecotourism development.

Table 9 presents the t-test results obtained for the research indicators.

The data were analyzed in SPSS using descriptive and inferential (t-test) statistics. Based on the resultant data, the relationships of the components of women empowerment with ecotourism development were all significant. Accordingly, the views of the local people indicate that Kordan Village has great potential for developing ecotourism through women empowerment.

Discussion and conclusion

All countries require three essential components of capital, technology, and skilled manpower to win the competition for development. Many experts see skilled manpower as the most important element of development. Capital and technology can be provided; however, it takes a lifetime to train and prepare skilled manpower. The qualified manpower is the greatest strength of a society that facilitates the process of development. Today, tourism development can be administered as a medicine to relieve

Table 1. Reliability assessment with Cronbach's alpha method. Source: Authors.

Dimension	Item (s)	Cronbach's alpha
Economic dimension	20	0.721
Sociocultural dimension	18	0.832
Environmental dimension	27	0.814

Table 2 Gender distribution of participants. Source: Authors.

Gender	Frequency	Frequency (%)
Male	173	57.7
Female	127	42.3
Total	300	100

Table 3. Age distribution of participants. Source: Authors.

Age (Year)	Frequency	Frequency (%)
18-25	14	4.7
26-35	128	42.7
36-45	86	28.7
46-60	34	11.3
> 60	38	12.6
Total	300	100

Table 4. Educational qualifications of participants. Source: Authors.

Educational qualifications	Frequency	Frequency (%)
Illiterate	18	6.0
High school Diploma	102	34.0
Associate degree	49	16.3
Bachelor's degree	114	38.0
Master's and higher degrees	17	5.7
Total	300	100

Table 5. Jobs of participants. Source: Authors.

Job	Frequency	Frequency (%)
Farming	49	16.3
Livestock farming	18	6.0
Handicraft making	49	16.3
Services (Supply of goods)	102	34.0
Education	17	5.7
Housekeeping	65	21.7
Total	300	100

economic, sociocultural, and environmental pains in rural communities. The development of ecotourism in rural areas necessitates active participation of local communities, stakeholders, and target groups, and participation, in turn, requires the empowerment of communities. This study analyzed the effect of women's empowerment on ecotourism development. Economic, sociocultural, and environmental dimensions of women empowerment had significant positive relationships with ecotourism development.

The economic dimension included indicators of entrepreneurship, investment, and revival of traditional handicrafts. Entrepreneurship requires psychological flexibility, risk-taking behavior, education, and knowledge, while investment requires economic stability. Revival of handicrafts is a major parameter of empowerment that provides many job opportunities. This indicator requires education, government support, banking support, the use of modern technology, etc. This result is consistent with the findings of Roknodin Eftekhari et al. (2009), Lenao & Basupi (2016), and Bansal & Kumar (2011).

The sociocultural dimension included indicators of education, social support, and participation. Education had a significant effect on women's empowerment, as women with higher educational qualifications enjoy greater financial status. However, according to some respondents, training can replace education. The level of social support depends on the relationships that an individual establishes with other people, groups, and communities. As the main component of empowerment, participation improves self-esteem and self-confidence. This indicator requires education, microcredit financing, elimination of false traditional beliefs, and elimination of labor market discrimination. This finding is in line with the results reported by Khosravi Pour & Khorooshani (2011), Sarason (1983), and Spreitzer (1995). The environmental dimension included the indicators of protection, training, and environmental landscape. Factors such as lack of suitable welfare facilities, rapid demographic growth, poor living conditions, use of toxic fertilizers, lack of awareness, and a poor human-nature relationship generally destroy natural resources. Raising awareness among rural women about the proper use of resources and their profitability for all people would encourage them to conserve natural resources. The main components of the environmental dimension included training, provision of proper living conditions, improvement of human-nature relationships, and economic sustainability. This finding is in line with the results of Zahedi & Najafi (2007), Barry (2012), and Osman and Tanner (2017).

Practical suggestions

Given the above discussions and in line with ecotourism

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of research variables. Source: Authors.

	Number	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Economic dimension	300	1.00	5.00	3.204	0.824
Sociocultural dimension	300	1.00	5.00	3.206	0.916
Environmental dimension	300	1.00	5.00	3.169	0.749

Table 7. Kolmogorov–Smirnov test results. Source: Authors.

Variable	P-value	Result
Economic dimension	0.133	Normal
Sociocultural dimension	0.126	Normal
Environmental dimension	0.167	Normal

Table 8. T-test results for research dimensions. Source: Authors.

Variable	Constant					Result
	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p-value	
Environmental dimension	3.169	0.7494	3.906	299	0.000	Confirmed
Sociocultural dimension	3.206	0.9161	3.894	299	0.000	Confirmed
Economic dimension	3.204	0.8244	4.303	299	0.000	Confirmed

Table 9. T-test results for research indicators. Source: Authors.

Variable	Constant					Result
	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p-value	
Investment	3.228	1.0122	3.907	299	0.000	Confirmed
Entrepreneurship	3.196	0.917	3.713	299	0.000	Confirmed
Revival of handicrafts	3.189	0.990	3.314	299	0.001	Confirmed
Education	3.228	1.0122	3.548	299	0.000	Confirmed
Social support	3.196	0.917	2.951	299	0.003	Confirmed
Participation	3.189	0.990	4.391	299	0.000	Confirmed
Protection	3.158	0.825	3.317	299	0.001	Confirmed
Training	3.164	0.817	3.490	299	0.001	Confirmed
Environmental landscape	3.182	0.815	3.910	299	0.000	Confirmed

development strategies, the following suggestions are proposed to empower local women living in Kordan Village.

1. Organizing entrepreneurship training workshops, establishing e-businesses, and paying long-term, low-interest entrepreneurship loans, and credits. Holding local handicraft training courses and alternative skill classes for low-educated people and organizing training courses on nature tours for rural women.
2. Supporting ecotourism activities of local women and girls by families and the government
3. Holding training courses to improve local women's knowledge of nature tours and medicinal plants. Providing local women with training sessions about the disposal of household wastes. Encouraging local women to preserve

the environment. Training women to preserve the Kordan River and its surrounding environment as an ecological landscape. Holding nature conservation festivals (e.g. National Tree Planting Day).

Scientific suggestions

People will willingly participate in the development process if they see the region as their own or if they see themselves as part of the region. In this case, economic, sociocultural, and environmental dimensions of empowerment will influence ecotourism development. The authors attempted to investigate the effects of economic, sociocultural, and environmental dimensions of women empowerment on ecotourism development. However, sociocultural and psychological problems

seem to have greater effects on development than economic and environmental problems. Given the day-to-day technological and scientific advancements in all communities, researchers are recommended to

adopt different approaches to examine the effects of socio-cultural and psychological dimensions of women empowerment on ecotourism development.

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