

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN PRIVATE AND COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM BUSINESSES IN THE BAYS OF HUATULCO, MEXICO. ARE THEY HEADING TOWARDS A CHANGE IN THE GENDER ROLE?

María José Fernández Aldecua and Luz Martínez Barón

Universidad de Mar. Huatulco. México

1. INTRODUCTION

Life for women who are a part of traditional communities is changing with the development of a new tourist project. Women are joining the tourism sector and are carrying out jobs that are considered «Feminine» socially, such as: chambermaids, cooks, receptionists, etc. The majority of them receive minimum wage in the hotel business. An alternative for unsalaried women is to take part in informal businesses, such as: renting out rooms, taking in laundry, selling food and goods on the street, among others. There is also the business owning option, which can be a way for women to stand out in the tourism business (Kadt, 1979, Reynoso-y-Valle and de Regt, 1979: 206). Women who choose this option, in a region that has a lot of touristic activity, are the subjects of this research project.

This study deals with the case of Bahías de Huatulco, in Oaxaca (Mexico), and analyzes the activity of businesswomen in two types of organizations: private businesses and community-base businesses. The basis of the analysis is gender perspective and seeks to find out how businesswomen had achieved *empowerment*, this being understood as the strengthening of feminine identity, the growth of their abilities, professional and personal development, and above all else, the self awareness and autonomy (Aranda, 2006).

Gender has been explained through at least two sociological perspectives: functionalist and feminist focus (Giddens, 2001). Functionalists, through the development of socialization theories, establish that gender concepts are formed the influence of social agents such as the family, friends or the media.

On the other hand, the feminist focus bases its argument around the patriarchal system, a structure of domination and control, or in other words, it looks at gender mainly as power relations (Scott, 1996 quoting Serret, 2008). One of these control structures is found in the world of work where industry and society see them as unable to carry out certain types of work, and limited in others. This segregation scheme is also seen in the tourism sector

where women still carry out the jobs that are considered «feminine» (Sparrer, 2003; Brunet and Alarcón, 2008).

This gender focus has also been applied in organizational sciences. For example, some authors have shown that «the feminization of organizations will be one of the neurological points of management in the 21st century (Dillanes Cisneros, *et al.*, 1998).

Also, Arias (2001) offers a typology from diverse processes that lead women to the business world in several ways:

1. Women *in* businesses: These are women who, due to unforeseen or accidental circumstances (widowhood, death of a father, husband's emigration) suddenly are pushed into creating a business or taking over one. Being in charge of the business is a means of survival of for the women and their families.
2. Women *of* business (businesswomen): These are women who consciously and rationally make a decision to create their own businesses, seeing their entrepreneurial project as a life choice, a way to make money, and a means of channeling their managerial interests.

Community-based business are collective undertakings whose goal is to improve the quality of life for members of a community and encourage economic development of a region (Welsch and Kuhns, 2001). So, «...community-based bussines means a qualitatively distinct form of ownership, organization and production purposes (...) which is governed by the social control of resources and equitable sharing of the benefits to be assessed through the market. The community enterprise is part of social economy, or the third sector, as well as cooperatives, associations, mutual funds and other forms of production based on the values of solidarity, cooperation and self-employment in search of economic efficiency...» (Maldonado, 2005).

One would expect that the organizational structure and purposes of these businesses, tending to greater autonomy and plurality in decision-making, create conditions to facilitate women's greater participation and integration into working life within their communities. But although there are cases where that has occurred in reality, the participation of women in the community-based enterprises is far from meaning empowerment. Such is the case of the ecotourism community enterprise of Tumani Tenda, The Gambia, where many women in the population are registered with the board of the company, but they are the wives of male members of the family with the greatest power within community and therefore within the company (Jones, 2005). This implies a pattern of gender-based dependency.

In contrast to this situation, in Latin America there are reported cases where women have taken control of community businesses and have acheived empowerment, in Mexico, for example, there are the cases of ecotourism projects in the Selva del Marinero in Biosphere Reserve Los Tuxtlas, Veracruz, where women are guides and administrators, and the project of Taselotzin in Cuetzalan, where 200 peasants and indigenous women manage the company (SEMARNAT, 2006). In turn, in the state of Oaxaca, another example of empowerment of women in community-base enterprises is a factory called Mazunte Natural Cosmetics (Natal, 2006).

2. METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted in two time periods: the first, between 2001-2003, data were collected from the private sector entrepreneurs; in the second period, between 2008-2009, information was collected from women participating in the social sector (community-based businesses).

In turn, the study of private entrepreneurs involved in tourism activity consisted of two phases: a census (2001) and the application of three surveys (2002-2003).

The second stage of research was dedicated to women participating in social enterprises, was carried out between October 2008 and June 2009. The unit of analysis in this case were not entrepreneurs individually, but community projects aimed at the tourism business. The research was exploratory and descriptive in scope and its instrumentation was qualitative, based on semi-structured interviews and non-participatory observation. A total of 13 interviews with two community-based enterprises were carried out (both are cooperative where all members are women).

3. RESULTS

Within the private sector, women who offer services to tourism in and around the resort of Huatulco, Oaxaca, have played an important role as entrepreneurs generating employment in the region, efficient business management and at the same time have maintained their traditional role within the family (as wives and mothers.) Nevertheless, there is self-devaluation of the effort and personal initiative, as well as social invisibility and lack of an awareness of being entrepreneurs.

On the other hand, there is no business organization that brings together women entrepreneurs in the region. Nor the regional or state authorities have promoted any program of financial support for this group. In the chambers of commerce is difficult to find one woman who presides, because usually those positions are occupied by managers of large hotels and shops. With this background, the institutional invisibility of the private women entrepreneurs are still the norm in this region of Mexico. This is added to the limited recognition at the local and family level. The empowerment of private entrepreneurs in this region is still far from being realized, unless it is achieved by a self-recognition of women's own identity and awareness of the gender situation common to them as a social group.

For their part, women who participate in community-based enterprises studied also face the constraints of the patriarchal family structure, and the requirements imposed by their role as wives and mothers. However, the status of these social entrepreneurs is different from private entrepreneurs, as they have managed to overcome the obstacles imposed by its gender at the family and community level; they have managed to remain steadfast in their participation in the cooperatives and are making progress, however slowly, towards building their empowerment.

Another manifestation of empowering women who are building these community enterprises is the changing perception of themselves as women and as well as the development of their assertiveness skills. Moreover, the entrepreneurs of the two

cooperatives studied (*Women of Clay* and *Flower of Clay*) reported that financial support for their families is one of the main motivations to participate in business. The comments of these women reflect the strong importance they give to their role as mothers and providers; in that sense, they indicated that their participation in the cooperative allows them to bring up their children and simultaneously have time to attend to them (because of the flexible schedule).

Some participants of the cooperatives surveyed stated that there were other reasons for their business endeavors which were not focused on family and children: the enjoyment of the activities (body massage with river mud Copalita) and contact with tourists and new experiences were also reasons important to engage in the tourism industry through its services cooperatives. They also mentioned, although to a lesser extent, the desire to increase their knowledge and gain independence from their husband or parents.

Expressing their views on working women in general they expressed polarized ideas; while some women felt that they are independent entrepreneurs who struggle to get ahead in life, others said they are women who «suffer from being far from home and family». Another group said it was good that women would work, provided they do not neglect their responsibilities as mothers and wives. However, when asked if they identified with some of these characteristics of women who work (entrepreneurial, independent, hard-working, etc.) they felt awkward and timidly responded «no». The latter reveals flaws in their self-recognition as entrepreneurs.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Being an entrepreneur, with all its implications, is a possibility to start the process of empowerment of women, although the relationship is not automatic. Many women entrepreneurs do not achieve that from the gender empowerment, and this is equally true for women in private business or community-based business: the repeated pattern of invisibility (to others and to themselves) may occur, regardless of how the businesswoman came to take charge of a business. In the case of private entrepreneurs in Huatulco women showed an ambivalent view of empowerment, considering that this process involves the strengthening of their professional and personal skills, but above all, social recognition, self-recognition and autonomy (Aranda, 2006). With regards to private entrepreneurs studied in this case, they lack the latter three skills and still face conditions as social invisibility and lack of individual and collective perception of being entrepreneurial. Their networking of entrepreneurs is virtually zero, which prevents creating an environment for awareness and self-recognition. This lack of social capital is one of the factors hindering the formation of a corporate identity and the entrepreneurial empowerment of women.

The case of women who make up the community-based enterprises of Copalita is different from private entrepreneurs. These cooperatives, fighting their poor educational level, invisibility and social marginalization of women, have achieved a better level of empowerment, including progress in key aspects such as their greater assertiveness and greater autonomy from their roles as mothers and wives. However, the internal division is their greatest enemy. There are limits to the growth of their businesses because they

refuse to work together in a single cooperative. The problem with them is their weak social capital, or their weak ability to create links. Without addressing this problem, they won't continue to grow as entrepreneurs, let alone move to a higher level of consciousness, autonomy and gender transformation.

Overall, tourism in the region of Huatulco has opened the possibility for women to develop the role of entrepreneurs. Gender has not been an impediment to their work policy; women entrepreneurs know how to be efficient. At the social level, there has been acceptance of women's entrepreneurial role as an economic benefit for families. However, this does not ensure that females in the business world are valued. Moreover, the constant search for balance between family and company indicates the persistence of the role of mothers and wives. And along with this there is an awareness of the presence of double or triple shifts characteristic of working women in the modern world.

In all cases, the role of women in terms of their gender obligations has not changed, even though tourism development has opened the opportunity to become efficient entrepreneurs. Both the private entrepreneurs as well as women in cooperative ones must comply with their housework and their roles as mothers and wives, just as they would if they were not entrepreneurs. This remains an element of exploitation and gender segregation since men do not share these tasks because they are still considered «feminine».

However, in this investigation it was verified that there is a «climate» more conducive to the empowerment of women in community-based businesses where all members are women. Not so among private entrepreneurs, where the invisibility and economic exploitation resulting from gender still persist. However, further studies are needed to verify these findings. A future line of study should be gender empowerment in community businesses where all members are women, compared with those where both men and women are involved.

5. REFERENCES

- ARANDA, G. (2006): «El empoderamiento de las mujeres: Una mirada desde México». In: *Las mujeres rurales en México*. Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Mujer. Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo. México.
- ARIAS, P. (2001): «Mujeres en los negocios y mujeres de negocios». In: Barrera Bassols, D. *Empresarias y ejecutivas. Mujeres con poder*. El Colegio de México. México.
- BRUNET, I. y ALARCÓN, A. (2008): «El turismo rural en Cataluña. Estrategias empresariales», *Revista Internacional de Sociología*, Vol. 66, No. 49, pp. 141-165.
- DE KADT, E. (1979): *Tourism: Passport to development?* Oxford University Press, New York.
- DILLANES CISNEROS, M. E. *et al.* (1998): «Las mujeres y el trabajo administrativo: el perfil de una carrera ejecutiva», *Gestión y estrategia*, N° 13 (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana. México, D.F.).
- GIDDENS, A. (2001): *Sociología*. (4ª ed.). Alianza Editorial, Madrid.
- JONES, S. (2005): «Community-based ecotourism, the significance of social capital», *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 32, No. 2, pp. 303-324.

- MALDONADO, C. (2005): *Pautas metodológicas para el análisis de experiencias de turismo comunitario*. Oficina Internacional del Trabajo. Ginebra.
- NATAL Martínez, A. (2006): «Cosméticos naturales de Mazunte: una empresa comunitaria de éxito (estudio de caso)». El Colegio Mexiquense. Toluca, México. Documentos de discusión sobre el tercer sector, No. 35.
- REYNOSO-Y-VALLE, A. and DE REGT, J. P. (1979): «Growing pains: Planned tourism development in Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo», In: DE KADT, E. *Tourism: Passport to development?* Oxford University Press. New York.
- SEMARNAT (2006): *Saber para proteger. Introducción al ecoturismo comunitario* (2ª ed.), Secretaría del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales. México (D.F.).
- SERRET, E. (2008): *Qué es y para qué es la perspectiva de género. Libro de texto para la asignatura: Perspectiva de género en educación superior*. Instituto de la Mujer Oaxaqueña, Oaxaca.
- SPARRER, M. (2003): «Género y turismo rural. El ejemplo de la Costa Coruñesa». *Cuadernos de Turismo*, No. 11, pp. 181-197.
- WELSCH, H. P. and KUHNS, B. A. (2002): *Community-Based Enterprises: Propositions and Cases*, DePaul University, Chicago, IL. (working paper).