

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

THE FEMALE ENTREPRENEUR IN RURAL TOURISM: PECULIARITIES OF THE COSTA RICAN CASE THROUGH THE REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the participation of women entrepreneurs has increased worldwide, which has contributed to stimulate the economies of the countries and to increase the income generation in rural communities. The service sector, particularly the tourism sector, offers greater opportunities for women to develop their businesses, due to the fact that tourism is currently an important generator of foreign exchange and a major source of direct and indirect employment. This is the case of rural tourism, which has emerged as an option for marginalized populations, including women and indigenous people, who live in rural areas and wish to diversify their productive activities or to start a business.

In this context, the purpose of this article is to share knowledge of the phenomenon of female entrepreneur in rural tourism in Costa Rica, framing it in the Latin American context and of rural women entrepreneurs. In order to have a holistic perspective on the phenomenon of rural tourism entrepreneurs, the article makes a systematic review of the literature and papers available in the field. In total, 91 empirical researches and reports from government and private agencies were reviewed, dated between 1993 and 2018. Those studies and reports addressed the issue of women entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship in rural tourism.

2. CHARACTERISTIC ELEMENTS OF THE ENTREPRENEUR WOMAN IN THE WORLD

Tourism in Latin America and the Caribbean continues to grow. In 2017, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile led the statistics of international tourist arrivals in South America, while Costa Rica and Panama did it in Central America, and, finally, Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico led in the Caribbean. Mexico stood out among the top ten destinations for international tourist arrivals. These countries are also in the best positions in the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index of 2017.

Despite favorable statistics, the region must improve security, protection, infrastructure, regulations, and facilities for doing business. Another aspect that requires attention is employment creation. Even though Brazil and Costa Rica have positive international tourist income data, they also have the highest unemployment rates for women and a high proportion of the female population living in poverty and extreme poverty in rural areas in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The review of literature shows that there are more coincidences than differences in the profile, motivations, and barriers encountered by women entrepreneurs dedicated to any type of business, tourism entrepreneurship, and rural tourism whether at global, Latin American or Costa Rican levels.

It is concluded that there are similarities in the age, size of the company and economic sector in which women entrepreneurs from Latin America, Costa Rica, and the rest of the world are involved.

These women entrepreneurs are in an age range between 30 and 50 years old, own microenterprises and operate in the service sector. However, there are differences in the educational level and financing opportunities of Latin American business women compared to those of Costa Rica and the rest of the world, since the ones in the first group have low educational level and required financial support from their parents to start, compared to having university degrees and using own resources to start the company of the second group. This situation might respond to the fact that in Costa Rica as well as in countries of the rest of the world, favorable conditions are offered to stimulate women entrepreneurs, while in other countries of Latin America, women face lower economic opportunities, have limited capital, and require more government support.

The women of the three analyzed geographic areas share the same reasons to undertake their business as they want to be independent, generate income, and improve their quality of life. Likewise, the barriers encountered by these entrepreneurs are similar, since they all have difficulties in obtaining financing and lack experience and training in business management. Bureaucracy is considered an obstacle to entrepreneurship; it affects not only women but also men.

3. ROLE OF THE WOMAN ENTREPRENEUR IN TOURISM

According to the articles reviewed, in the rest of Latin America, tourism business women generally have a higher level of education; they even received training in tourism issues, while most Costa Rican women only have elementary education. Both in the rest

of the world and in Latin America, women own micro or small businesses with less than 19 employees, and they used their savings to start the business.

The reasons why tourism women entrepreneurs decide to start a business are necessity, that is, economic reasons, as well as the search for autonomy and independence as well as personal satisfaction. Both globally and in Latin America, the search for flexibility to combine work and family stands out. Costa Rican tourism entrepreneurs were the only ones who indicated that they do not consider entrepreneurship as a duty, projecting it as a form of entertainment that provides them autonomy, recognition and allows them to improve their quality of life. This is due to the working structure in the region. These women entrepreneurs meet to work on their handicrafts, turning work hours into an alternative halfway to leisure, while strengthening their skills by breaking traditional gender structures.

Tourism women entrepreneurs in Central America (both Costa Ricans and a part of Latin Americans), are characterized by the lack of confidence to start their businesses and the lack of land titles to facilitate financial opportunities. Regarding rural tourism women entrepreneurs, information related to Latin America and Costa Rica is scarce, making it difficult to make a comparison. The only confrontation that can be made of the characteristics between business women in both regions is that they have low level of formal education. This may be due to poverty conditions in rural areas and, therefore, the lack of opportunities.

4. THE ENTREPRENEUR WOMN IN RURAL TOURISM

Rural tourism businesswomen at different scales are married and have children. Since touristic activities in developed countries are different from those carried out in developing countries, rural tourism entrepreneurs in Latin America have lower educational levels. All of them, including Costa Ricans, are motivated by the need to have new sources of income and the search for personal and professional growth that allows them to improve their quality of life.

All rural women entrepreneurs in tourism face the obstacle of tourism seasonality, living in a framework of economic uncertainty. Traditional gender roles continue to assign domestic and family responsibilities to female entrepreneurs such as cooking and cleaning, which implies that these women face barriers such as lack of family support and, in many cases, lack of confidence.

It should be added that there is a striking difference in the fact that Costa Rican women entrepreneurs in rural tourism point out the difficulty balancing work and family as a barrier, while other Latin American women and the rest of the world, include it as a motivation. This difficulty derives from the lack of support from their partners, with a traditional chauvinistic mentality, who consider that they should take exclusive care of family and household chores.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REFLECTIONS

The analysis of literature and research on women entrepreneurs in the rural tourism sector in Costa Rica shows some very relevant conclusions both for women entrepreneurs and for the organizations responsible for their promotion.

Costa Rica has positioned itself worldwide as a sustainable tourist destination and unlike the rest of Central American countries, except for Panama; it stands out for its tourist competitiveness and for providing ease of doing business. In Costa Rica, although the development of rural tourism is lower compared to countries such as Argentina, Chile, Brazil or Mexico; its importance has been recognized as a tourist product that complements the existing ones and a varied rural tourist offer has been consolidated.

Costa Rican rural tourism entrepreneurs seem to show a lower educational level than the rest of the female entrepreneurial ecosystem in the country. The motivations of these women include the possibility of having a better life by generating their own income, but also the willingness to maintain and show their lifestyle, linked to Costa Rican cultural roots. According to the ideas of preservation of the environment that have positioned Costa Rica as one of the main recipients of sustainable tourism, these entrepreneurs create their companies trying not to vary their traditions and show them to the tourists.

The review of literature reveals how entrepreneur women share many features throughout the world. Among them, there is limited financial access, informality and the necessity to combine family life with professional life. The benefits of female entrepreneurship are divided into two aspects. On the one hand, in the improvement of the quality of life of the family due to the increase in family income, and, on the other hand, the advantages derived from the empowerment of women through the creation of their companies. These two effects reinforce each other throughout the entrepreneurial process, multiplying the growth potential of their companies and the macroeconomic one.

In the case of Costa Rican rural tourism, these women face significant limitations compared to the rest of the entrepreneurs. Being a rural environment, the possibilities offered by the labor market are limited and family conditions do not allow these women to work far from their homes. In this way, the establishment of small businesses within their environment allows them to have their own source of work and generate better living conditions near their homes. The link of these entrepreneurs with the traditions and culture of their country makes the benefits of entrepreneurship get expanded. The possibility of creating a sustainable way of life, combined with the pride and knowledge of the environment, increases the capacity of agency, empowerment and self-confidence of these women. This business strategy, although initially of limited growth, is presented as an ideal for these women and the economic development of these regions in Costa Rica.

This research is not exempted of limitations, which, from our perspective, can become future research opportunities. Somehow, most of the studies found in this review refer to ventures in developed countries. There is still a shortage of information on the theme of women entrepreneurs in rural tourism, especially in Latin America and Costa Rica. The lack of empirical research and updated censuses makes it difficult to carry out a more detailed analysis of the real situation of these women. It is necessary to know more about women entrepreneurs, their characteristics, strengths and weaknesses, in order to promote policies, programs and projects that encourage their participation, business training, and facilitate access to credit as well as to encourage the growth of their companies.