

Original Paper

Women's Participation in Community-Based Tourism Development: Evidence from Thai Nguyen Province, Vietnam

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Abstract

Women are key actors in community-based tourism (CBT), contributing to livelihoods, cultural preservation, and local development. However, their participation often remains concentrated in service and low-value activities, with limited involvement in governance and decision-making. This study examines women's participation in CBT development in Thai Nguyen Province, Vietnam, using the perspectives of empowerment, human capital, social capital, and gender-responsive development. Based on 15 in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis, the study applies thematic analysis to identify major patterns of participation and constraint. The findings show that women are active in accommodation, local cuisine, handicrafts, cultural preservation, and small-scale tourism entrepreneurship, but remain underrepresented in strategic planning, community governance, and resource allocation. Five groups of factors shape their participation: economic conditions, socio-cultural norms, institutional support, human capital, and social capital. The study argues that empowerment is a key mechanism through which women's participation can shift from functional involvement to substantive participation. It contributes an integrated framework linking resources, participation, empowerment, and sustainable CBT outcomes, while offering policy implications for gender-responsive tourism governance and inclusive community development.

Keywords

community-based tourism; women's participation; women's empowerment; social capital; human capital; gender-responsive tourism; Vietnam.

1. Introduction

Community-based tourism (CBT) has emerged as an important strategy for promoting sustainable development, poverty reduction, cultural preservation, and community empowerment, particularly in

rural and ethnic minority regions. By emphasizing local participation and community ownership, CBT contributes not only to economic growth but also to social inclusion and cultural sustainability. Within this context, women represent a critical stakeholder group whose participation is essential to the long-term success and sustainability of community-based tourism initiatives.

The importance of women's participation in tourism development has been increasingly recognized in international development agendas. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) explicitly highlight gender equality (SDG 5), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), and sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11) as interconnected objectives that cannot be achieved without strengthening women's economic and social participation. Tourism has been widely acknowledged as a sector capable of creating employment opportunities, generating income, and enhancing women's access to economic resources. However, evidence from many developing countries indicates that women often remain concentrated in low-paid, informal, and service-oriented tourism activities, while their participation in leadership, governance, and decision-making processes remains limited.

Existing studies have documented the significant contributions of women to community-based tourism through hospitality services, handicraft production, cultural performance, food preparation, and local entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, much of the current literature focuses primarily on describing women's roles and economic contributions rather than examining the mechanisms through which participation translates into empowerment and sustainable development outcomes. As a result, important questions remain regarding how women gain access to resources, develop capabilities, strengthen social networks, and increase their influence within tourism governance structures.

A further limitation of existing research lies in its geographical concentration. Most studies on women and tourism have been conducted in well-established tourism destinations or economically developed regions. Comparatively little attention has been paid to community-based tourism in Vietnam's mountainous and midland provinces, where ethnic diversity, traditional gender norms, and uneven access to development resources create unique opportunities and challenges for women's participation. Thai Nguyen Province represents a particularly relevant case because of its growing community-based tourism sector associated with tea culture, ecological tourism, and ethnic minority cultural heritage. Despite its increasing importance, empirical evidence regarding women's participation in community-based tourism in this context remains limited.

Moreover, previous studies have rarely adopted an integrated analytical perspective that combines empowerment theory, human capital theory, and social capital theory. While empowerment studies emphasize agency and decision-making power, human capital theory highlights the importance of education, skills, and knowledge, and social capital theory focuses on networks, trust, and collective action. Examining these perspectives together may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping women's participation and the pathways through which tourism contributes to empowerment and sustainable community development.

Against this background, the present study investigates women's participation in community-based tourism development in Thai Nguyen Province, Vietnam. Specifically, the study aims to: (i) examine the forms and levels of women's participation in the community-based tourism value chain; (ii) identify the economic, socio-cultural, institutional, human capital, and social capital factors influencing their participation; (iii) explore the role of empowerment as a mechanism linking participation and development outcomes; and (iv) propose a gender-responsive model for promoting inclusive and sustainable community-based tourism.

To achieve these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do women participate in different stages of the community-based tourism value chain?

RQ2: What factors facilitate or constrain women's participation in community-based tourism development?

RQ3: What role does empowerment play in transforming women's participation into broader social and economic benefits?

RQ4: What policy and governance measures can enhance substantive women's participation in community-based tourism?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to the growing literature on gender and tourism in three ways. First, it extends existing research beyond descriptive accounts of women's roles by examining the mechanisms underlying substantive participation and empowerment. Second, it provides empirical evidence from an under-researched region of Vietnam, thereby enriching the geographical diversity of community-based tourism studies. Third, it proposes an integrated analytical framework linking human capital, social capital, institutional conditions, women's participation, and empowerment outcomes, offering both theoretical insights and practical implications for gender-responsive tourism development.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Community-Based Tourism and Sustainable Development

Community-based tourism (CBT) is widely regarded as a participatory approach that promotes local livelihoods, cultural preservation, and sustainable development. Unlike conventional tourism, CBT emphasizes community ownership, local participation, and equitable benefit-sharing. Scheyvens (2000) argues that CBT should generate economic, social, psychological, and political empowerment for local communities, while Dolezal and Novelli (2020) highlight its contribution to resilience and inclusive development. Nevertheless, unequal participation and power asymmetries remain significant challenges, particularly for women.

2.2 Women's Participation in Community-Based Tourism

Women's participation has become a central theme in tourism studies. Research shows that women contribute substantially through hospitality services, handicrafts, food production, cultural preservation, and small-scale entrepreneurship. While tourism often creates employment and income opportunities,

women frequently remain concentrated in lower-paid and less influential positions. Studies in Asia and Vietnam further reveal persistent barriers, including gender norms, limited access to resources, inadequate skills, and restricted participation in decision-making processes. Existing research largely focuses on women's roles rather than the mechanisms linking participation, empowerment, and sustainable development outcomes.

2.3 Empowerment Theory

Empowerment theory provides a useful framework for understanding how participation can generate broader developmental outcomes. Rowlands (1997) views empowerment as increasing individuals' control over decisions affecting their lives, while Kabeer (1999) emphasizes the expansion of strategic life choices. In tourism studies, empowerment is commonly examined through four dimensions: economic empowerment (income and resource access), social empowerment (status and social inclusion), psychological empowerment (confidence and self-esteem), and political empowerment (leadership and decision-making). These dimensions are closely linked to women's ability to benefit from tourism development.

2.4 Human Capital Theory

Human capital theory suggests that education, skills, and experience enhance individuals' productivity and opportunities (Becker, 1993). In community-based tourism, human capital includes formal education, vocational training, tourism skills, entrepreneurial capabilities, language proficiency, and digital competencies. Higher levels of human capital enable women to access tourism markets, manage businesses, and adapt to changing tourism demands, thereby strengthening both participation and empowerment.

2.5 Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory emphasizes the value of networks, trust, and collective action in facilitating development (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993). In community-based tourism, social capital enables access to information, resources, markets, and institutional support. Women's associations, cooperatives, and community organizations often provide critical platforms for cooperation, learning, and entrepreneurship. Strong social capital can therefore reduce participation barriers and enhance empowerment outcomes.

2.6 Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the above literature, this study proposes an integrated framework linking structural factors, participation, and empowerment outcomes in community-based tourism. Women's participation is influenced by five groups of factors: economic factors, socio-cultural factors, institutional factors, human capital, and social capital. These factors shape opportunities and constraints for engagement in tourism activities. Participation, in turn, contributes to economic, social, psychological, and political empowerment, which ultimately supports sustainable community-based tourism development. Accordingly, women's empowerment is conceptualized as a mediating mechanism between participation and sustainable development outcomes.



Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case-study approach to explore women's participation in community-based tourism (CBT) and the factors shaping their involvement. A qualitative design is appropriate for examining experiences, perceptions, and empowerment processes within specific community contexts.

3.2 Study Site

The research was conducted in Thai Nguyen Province, Vietnam, a rapidly developing CBT destination characterized by diverse tourism resources. The study covers four tourism spaces: ecotourism, tea tourism, ethnic cultural tourism, and urban tourism services, providing a comprehensive understanding of women's participation across different tourism settings.

3.3 Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with direct experience in CBT activities. The study involved 15 in-depth interviews, including eight women engaged in tourism services and entrepreneurship, three local government officials, two representatives of the Women's Union, and two representatives of tourism cooperatives and community tourism groups.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through three main sources: in-depth interviews, field observations, and secondary documents. Interviews explored participants' experiences, opportunities, constraints, and perceptions

regarding women's participation in CBT. Observations and documentary sources were used to triangulate and validate the findings.

3.5 Data Analysis

The study applied thematic analysis to identify key patterns and relationships within the data. Interview transcripts and field notes were coded through a three-stage process: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Themes were then organized around participation, influencing factors, empowerment, and sustainable tourism outcomes.

3.6 Research Ethics

The research adhered to established ethical standards. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and confidentiality was ensured throughout the research process. Personal information was anonymized to protect participants' privacy.

4. Findings

4.1 Women's Roles in Community-Based Tourism

The findings indicate that women play a central role in the development of community-based tourism (CBT) in Thai Nguyen Province. Their participation extends across a wide range of tourism-related activities, making them key contributors to local livelihoods, cultural preservation, and community development.

Women are particularly active in homestay operations, food services, tea-tourism experiences, handicraft production, and cultural heritage preservation. In many communities, women manage accommodation services, prepare local cuisine, organize cultural performances, and introduce visitors to traditional customs and lifestyles. They also play an important role in preserving indigenous knowledge and cultural values, which constitute essential tourism resources.

Despite their extensive involvement in tourism operations, women's roles remain concentrated in service provision and household-based tourism activities. Their participation in strategic planning, destination management, and tourism governance remains relatively limited.

4.2 Women's Participation across the Tourism Value Chain

The study reveals that women's participation varies significantly across different stages of the tourism value chain (Figure 2).

Women are highly represented in service delivery activities, including accommodation, food preparation, customer service, and cultural interpretation. They are also actively involved in production activities such as tea processing, handicraft manufacturing, and the preparation of tourism products.

Participation is comparatively lower in marketing and business development activities. Limited digital skills, inadequate market information, and restricted access to external networks often reduce women's ability to engage in tourism promotion and market expansion.

The lowest level of participation is observed in community governance and tourism decision-making processes. Although women contribute substantially to tourism operations, their representation in

management boards, tourism cooperatives, and local planning committees remains limited. This finding suggests a gap between operational participation and strategic influence within community-based tourism systems.



Figure 2. Women in the Community-Based Tourism Value Chain

Source: Author's synthesis from field interviews and observations

Figure 2 illustrates the positions occupied by women across the community-based tourism value chain. The findings indicate that women are highly represented in production and service delivery activities, particularly in homestay operations, food preparation, handicrafts, and cultural performances. Their participation gradually decreases in marketing activities and becomes most limited in community governance, including tourism committees, cooperatives, and local decision-making bodies. This pattern highlights a persistent gap between operational involvement and strategic influence, suggesting that women's participation remains largely functional rather than substantive.

4.3 Barriers to Women's Participation

The findings identify four major categories of barriers that constrain women's participation in community-based tourism.

4.3.1 Economic Barriers

Limited financial resources remain one of the most significant constraints. Many women face difficulties accessing credit, investment capital, and business development resources. Financial limitations restrict their ability to expand tourism enterprises, improve service quality, and adopt new technologies.

Market access also represents a major challenge. Women frequently depend on intermediaries and local networks rather than direct market connections, reducing their bargaining power and business opportunities.

4.3.2 Socio-cultural Barriers

Traditional gender norms continue to shape women's opportunities and responsibilities. Participants reported that household duties, childcare responsibilities, and community expectations often limit the time and resources available for tourism activities.

The persistence of the "double burden" phenomenon, where women simultaneously manage income-generating activities and domestic responsibilities, reduces their capacity to participate fully in tourism governance and leadership.

4.3.3 Institutional Barriers

Institutional support for women in tourism remains uneven. Although various tourism and rural development programs exist, participants reported limited access to information, training opportunities, and policy support mechanisms.

Several respondents indicated that women are rarely involved in tourism planning and decision-making processes at the community level, which restricts their influence over resource allocation and development priorities.

4.3.4 Human Capital Constraints

Human capital limitations also affect participation. Deficiencies in digital skills, foreign language proficiency, business management capabilities, and tourism marketing knowledge were frequently identified during interviews.

As tourism becomes increasingly dependent on online platforms and digital communication, skill gaps may further widen inequalities in tourism participation unless targeted interventions are implemented.

4.4 Enabling Factors for Women's Participation

Despite these challenges, several factors facilitate women's engagement in community-based tourism. Training programs play a critical role in enhancing tourism knowledge, entrepreneurial capacity, and service quality. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of vocational training and tourism-related skill development.

Women's associations constitute another important source of support. These organizations provide information, networking opportunities, financial assistance, and capacity-building activities that strengthen women's participation in tourism enterprises and community initiatives.

Community networks and social relationships also contribute significantly to participation. Strong social capital enables women to access information, exchange experiences, mobilize resources, and develop collaborative tourism products.

Government support, including tourism promotion programs, infrastructure development, and policy incentives, further facilitates participation. In addition, digital transformation has created new opportunities for tourism marketing, customer engagement, and business expansion through social media and online platforms.

These findings suggest that enabling factors operate through both institutional and social mechanisms, highlighting the importance of supportive governance structures and community networks.

4.5 Women's Empowerment Outcomes

The findings demonstrate that participation in community-based tourism generates multiple empowerment outcomes for women.

First, tourism participation contributes to increased household income and improved economic security. Many respondents reported greater financial independence and enhanced capacity to contribute to family decision-making.

Second, participation strengthens confidence, self-esteem, and social recognition. Women described feeling more respected within their families and communities as a result of their economic contributions and tourism-related achievements.

Third, tourism creates opportunities for leadership and community engagement. Several participants reported increased involvement in community organizations, tourism groups, and local development initiatives.

Finally, tourism participation contributes to greater decision-making power at both household and community levels. Although significant gender disparities remain, the findings suggest that participation can serve as an important pathway toward economic, social, psychological, and political empowerment. Overall, the results indicate that empowerment functions as a critical mechanism linking women's participation to broader development outcomes. While participation alone does not automatically generate empowerment, access to resources, skills, networks, and supportive institutions can transform tourism engagement into a more substantive and sustainable form of empowerment. These outcomes, in turn, contribute to more inclusive and resilient community-based tourism development.

5. Discussion

5.1 From Participation to Empowerment

The findings suggest that women's participation in community-based tourism extends beyond income-generating activities and can serve as a pathway toward broader empowerment outcomes. However, participation alone does not automatically lead to empowerment. Rather, empowerment emerges when women gain access to resources, develop capabilities, strengthen social networks, and increase their influence in decision-making processes.

This finding is broadly consistent with Scheyvens (2000), who argues that community-based tourism should generate economic, social, psychological, and political empowerment for local communities. It also supports Kabeer's (1999) proposition that empowerment involves expanding individuals' ability to make strategic life choices. In the present study, women reported increased income, enhanced self-confidence, stronger social recognition, and greater involvement in community affairs, indicating that tourism can contribute to multiple dimensions of empowerment.

The results further confirm patterns reported in previous international studies. Similar to findings from China, Nepal, and Indonesia, women's participation in tourism was associated with improved livelihoods and expanded economic opportunities. Consistent with Guo et al. (2023), tourism participation in Thai Nguyen has enabled women to generate additional income and strengthen their social standing within households and communities.

However, the findings also reveal important differences. While previous studies often emphasize tourism entrepreneurship and market participation as the primary drivers of empowerment, women in Thai Nguyen derive empowerment not only from commercial activities but also from their role as custodians of local culture. Tea traditions, indigenous knowledge, culinary practices, and ethnic cultural heritage are not merely tourism products but valuable cultural resources through which women gain social recognition and community influence.

Unlike findings reported in China (Guo et al., 2023), women in Thai Nguyen derive substantial empowerment benefits from tea-culture tourism, where cultural knowledge itself functions as a form of productive capital. This suggests that empowerment in community-based tourism may emerge not only through economic participation but also through the preservation, transmission, and commercialization of local cultural assets.

At the same time, the study identifies a persistent gap between operational participation and strategic influence. Women are highly represented in homestay services, food preparation, handicrafts, and cultural performances but remain underrepresented in tourism governance, planning, and resource allocation. Similar patterns have been observed in other developing-country contexts, where women's economic participation increases more rapidly than their political influence. This finding reinforces the argument that empowerment should be understood as a gradual and multidimensional process rather than an automatic outcome of tourism engagement.

The Vietnamese context also offers additional insights into the relationship between participation and empowerment. In many communities, women's participation is embedded within dense family networks, village institutions, and mass organizations such as the Women's Union. These institutional arrangements create supportive environments that facilitate participation while simultaneously reflecting traditional gender expectations. Consequently, empowerment emerges through a complex interaction between individual agency and collective community structures.

Overall, the findings suggest that community-based tourism contributes to empowerment when participation is accompanied by access to resources, supportive institutions, and opportunities for

decision-making. This perspective extends existing tourism research by highlighting the importance of contextual and cultural factors in shaping empowerment pathways. Rather than viewing participation as an end in itself, the study conceptualizes participation as a transformative process through which women strengthen their capabilities, increase their agency, and contribute to sustainable community development.

5.2 Human Capital as a Catalyst

The study highlights human capital as a critical catalyst linking participation and empowerment. Women with higher levels of education, tourism knowledge, managerial capacity, and digital competencies were more likely to engage successfully in tourism entrepreneurship and community leadership.

Consistent with Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993), investments in education and skills increase individuals' opportunities to access markets, manage businesses, and adapt to changing economic environments. In the context of community-based tourism, vocational training and capacity-building programs provide women with the knowledge and confidence required to move beyond traditional service roles.

Digital skills are particularly important in contemporary tourism development. Online marketing, social media promotion, digital booking platforms, and e-commerce have become essential tools for tourism enterprises. Women possessing digital competencies are therefore better positioned to expand their customer base, access information, and participate in broader tourism networks.

The findings further indicate that managerial and entrepreneurial skills are increasingly important for enhancing women's influence within tourism organizations and community governance structures. Thus, human capital should not be viewed merely as an economic asset but as a strategic resource for empowerment and leadership.

5.3 Social Capital and Collective Action

Beyond individual capabilities, the findings emphasize the importance of social capital in facilitating women's participation and empowerment. Networks, trust, and collective action provide women with access to information, financial resources, market opportunities, and institutional support.

The Women's Union emerges as a particularly significant actor in this process. Through training activities, networking opportunities, and community mobilization, the organization creates supportive environments that encourage women's engagement in tourism development. Similarly, tourism cooperatives and community groups provide platforms for collaboration, resource sharing, and collective learning.

These findings align with the arguments of Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1993), who emphasize that social capital enhances cooperation and collective problem-solving. In community-based tourism, social capital reduces transaction costs, strengthens trust among stakeholders, and facilitates coordinated action for local development.

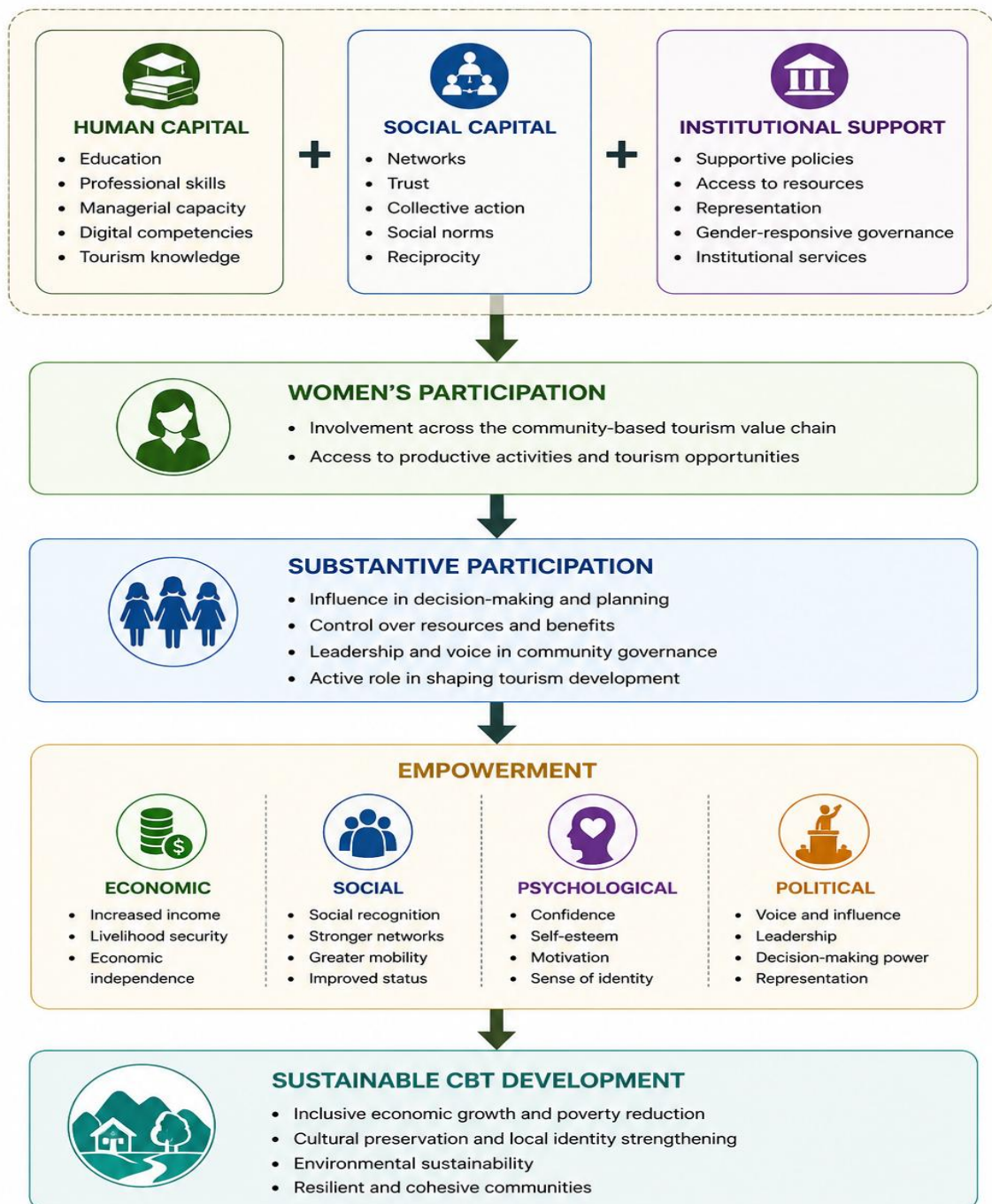
Importantly, the study suggests that empowerment is not solely an individual achievement but also a collective process. Women's participation becomes more meaningful when supported by strong

community networks and inclusive local institutions. This highlights the interdependence between individual agency and collective capacity in sustainable tourism development.

5.4 Gender-Responsive Community Tourism: Toward a Substantive Participation Model

One of the key theoretical implications of this study is the distinction between functional participation and substantive participation. Existing tourism research often measures participation in terms of employment, income generation, or involvement in tourism activities. However, the findings indicate that participation should also be evaluated according to women's capacity to influence decisions, access resources, exercise leadership, and shape development outcomes.

Building upon empowerment theory, human capital theory, and social capital theory, this study proposes a Substantive Participation Model (SPM) for community-based tourism.



Note: SPM = Substantive Participation Model.

Figure 3. Substantive Participation Model (SPM)

Source: Author’s synthesis based on the study findings and theoretical framework.

Figure 3 presents the Substantive Participation Model (SPM) proposed by this study. The model suggests that women’s participation in community-based tourism becomes substantive when supported by three enabling conditions: human capital, social capital, and institutional support. These conditions facilitate

women's engagement across the tourism value chain and create opportunities for greater influence in decision-making, leadership, and resource allocation. As participation becomes more substantive, women achieve multidimensional empowerment, including economic, social, psychological, and political outcomes. Ultimately, these empowerment outcomes contribute to more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable community-based tourism development.

The model suggests that women's participation becomes substantive when three conditions are fulfilled. First, women possess sufficient human capital, including education, professional skills, managerial competencies, and digital capabilities. Second, they benefit from strong social capital through networks, trust, and collective action. Third, supportive institutional environments provide opportunities for representation, resource access, and participation in governance.

Under these conditions, participation evolves from operational involvement to meaningful influence. Women are no longer passive beneficiaries or service providers but become active agents capable of shaping tourism development processes. Substantive participation subsequently generates multidimensional empowerment outcomes, including economic independence, social recognition, psychological confidence, and political influence.

The proposed model contributes to the literature by integrating structural conditions, participation processes, empowerment outcomes, and sustainable tourism development into a single analytical framework. It also provides a practical lens for evaluating gender responsiveness in community-based tourism initiatives.

Overall, the study argues that sustainable community-based tourism cannot be achieved merely through increasing women's numerical participation. Rather, long-term sustainability depends on creating conditions that enable substantive participation and genuine empowerment. This perspective shifts attention from participation as an end in itself toward participation as a transformative process that promotes gender equality, community resilience, and sustainable development.

6. Policy Implications

The findings suggest that promoting women's substantive participation in community-based tourism requires a comprehensive policy approach that addresses both structural constraints and empowerment opportunities. Based on the study results, five policy implications are proposed.

6.1 Strengthening Women's Capacity and Skills

Capacity building should be prioritized as a foundation for women's participation and empowerment. Training programs need to move beyond basic tourism services and focus on entrepreneurship, leadership, business management, foreign languages, and digital competencies. Enhancing women's human capital will improve their ability to access tourism markets, manage enterprises, and participate in decision-making processes.

6.2 Expanding Access to Finance

Limited access to financial resources remains a major barrier to women's tourism entrepreneurship. Local authorities and financial institutions should develop gender-responsive credit schemes, microfinance programs, and start-up support mechanisms tailored to women engaged in community-based tourism. Improving access to capital can strengthen business sustainability and encourage innovation.

6.3 Promoting Digital Transformation

Digital transformation offers new opportunities for tourism development and women's economic inclusion. Policies should support digital literacy, online marketing skills, e-commerce applications, and the use of digital tourism platforms. Expanding women's digital capabilities will enhance market access, business competitiveness, and resilience in a rapidly changing tourism environment.

6.4 Advancing Gender-Responsive Governance

Community-based tourism policies should move beyond increasing women's numerical participation and focus on strengthening their influence in governance and decision-making. This requires ensuring women's representation in tourism management boards, cooperatives, and community planning processes. Gender-responsive governance can help reduce structural inequalities and promote more inclusive tourism development.

6.5 Strengthening Community Partnerships

Effective community-based tourism depends on collaboration among local governments, women's organizations, tourism cooperatives, businesses, and community groups. Strengthening these partnerships can improve resource mobilization, knowledge sharing, and collective action. In particular, Women's Unions and community organizations should play a more active role in supporting women's participation, leadership, and empowerment.

Overall, the study suggests that sustainable community-based tourism cannot be achieved solely through economic interventions. Long-term success requires an integrated strategy that combines human capital development, financial inclusion, digital transformation, gender-responsive governance, and community partnerships. Such an approach can enhance women's substantive participation and contribute to more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable tourism development.

7. Conclusion

This study examined women's participation in community-based tourism (CBT) development in Thai Nguyen Province, Vietnam, with particular attention to the factors influencing participation and the role of empowerment in promoting sustainable tourism development. Drawing on the perspectives of empowerment theory, human capital theory, and social capital theory, the study explored how women engage in tourism activities and how such participation contributes to broader development outcomes.

The findings reveal that women play a central role in community-based tourism through homestay services, local cuisine, handicraft production, tea-tourism activities, and cultural heritage preservation. Their contributions are essential to both tourism development and community well-being. However,

women's participation remains uneven across the tourism value chain. While they are highly involved in service delivery and production activities, their representation in tourism governance, strategic planning, and resource allocation remains limited.

The study identifies five major groups of factors influencing women's participation, including economic conditions, socio-cultural norms, institutional support, human capital, and social capital. Financial constraints, limited market access, traditional gender roles, insufficient policy support, and skill gaps continue to hinder women's participation. At the same time, training opportunities, community networks, women's organizations, government support, and digital transformation serve as important enabling factors.

A key finding of the study is that empowerment functions as a critical mechanism linking participation and sustainable development outcomes. Women's participation contributes not only to increased income but also to enhanced confidence, social recognition, leadership opportunities, and decision-making power. These outcomes demonstrate that participation can become a pathway toward multidimensional empowerment when supported by appropriate resources, institutions, and social networks.

The study makes three principal academic contributions. First, it extends the literature on gender and tourism by moving beyond descriptive analyses of women's roles to examine the mechanisms through which participation generates empowerment outcomes. Second, it provides empirical evidence from an under-researched context in Vietnam's midland and mountainous region, thereby enriching the geographical diversity of community-based tourism research. Third, it proposes the Substantive Participation Model (SPM), which conceptualizes empowerment as a mediating mechanism connecting human capital, social capital, institutional support, women's participation, and sustainable tourism development. This framework offers a more integrated understanding of gender-responsive community tourism.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that promoting women's participation requires more than increasing employment opportunities. Effective policies should focus on capacity building, financial inclusion, digital transformation, gender-responsive governance, and strengthened community partnerships. Such measures can help transform women's participation from operational involvement into meaningful influence over tourism development processes.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is based on a qualitative case study in a single province and a relatively small number of interview participants. Therefore, the findings may not be fully generalizable to other destinations or tourism contexts. In addition, the study focuses primarily on women's perspectives and does not examine broader stakeholder dynamics in depth.

Future research could employ comparative studies across different regions, incorporate larger samples and mixed-method approaches, and test the proposed Substantive Participation Model quantitatively. Further investigation into digital inclusion, tourism governance, and women's leadership in community-based tourism would also contribute to a deeper understanding of sustainable and gender-responsive tourism development.

The study argues that sustainable community-based tourism cannot be achieved solely through women's economic participation. Rather, long-term sustainability depends on creating conditions that enable substantive participation, empowerment, and inclusive governance. This perspective represents the principal theoretical contribution of the study.

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