



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Are women Empowered through ecotourism projects? A quantitative approach “Ecotourism and women empowerment”

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Apr 24, 2024 Accepted: Jun 16, 2024	Women's empowerment in ecotourism services has gained considerable attention globally. With its primary focus on the integration of environmental conservation and socio-economic development initiatives, Ecotourism represents a viable option to address gender inequality, poverty, and unemployment among women in rural areas. While there have been several empirical attempts to explain the role of ecotourism in sustainable development, very little has been documented about the benefits of ecotourism services for women. A quantitative approach in the form of a questionnaire was used to collect data from 204 participants in the four local municipalities of Hlabisa, Jozini, Mtubatuba, and Umhlabuyalingana. A descriptive statistical analysis technique was applied to interpret the results. The study revealed that ecotourism has the potential to create meaningful employment and business opportunities for women, especially if gender mainstreaming activities are incorporated into ecotourism services. As a consequence, the study recommended that women empowerment efforts be integrated with mainstream tourism services to ensure congruence in both provision and outcomes.
Keywords Women's empowerment Ecotourism Employment Capacity building Business information Rural community	
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INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism provides entry level job opportunities for women while simultaneously enabling their participation in venture creation and self-employment activities (Xaba et al., 2024; Dumbrăveanu et al., 2016). Ecotourism as a vehicle for gender mainstreaming is critical in ensuring that women transition from a position of powerlessness to one in which their needs and aspirations are nurtured and advanced considerably. Women's participation in ecotourism ensures community support and acceptance of ecotourism projects and ensures that project outcomes meet community needs and expectations (Stronza et al., 2019). Promoting women's empowerment in ecotourism is consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals of ending poverty, improving gender equality, and ensuring equitable access to economic opportunities for all, including women (Alfadhli, 2020).

Empowerment entails overcoming the barriers that prevent women from realizing their development goals, giving them the knowledge and skills they need, and ensuring equitable access to productive resources (Adanlawo et al., 2023; Deen et al., 2016). Economic empowerment creates opportunities for women to access capital, business training, preferential procurement, and employment opportunities (Xu et al., 2023). But economic empowerment hinges on the capabilities of women to develop themselves (Yanes et al., 2019). Social empowerment includes women's access

to education and training opportunities, coaching, mentorship, and support networks (Makena et al., 2014), while women's political empowerment entails equitable representation of women in ecotourism structures and recognition of their rights to property and land resources (Chaka and Adanlawo, 2023b; Shoo, 2017). Psychologically empowered women have self-confidence, self-motivation, and a desire to learn in ways that benefit their families. Given the dearth of empirical studies on women and tourism in developing countries, a systematic investigation is therefore necessary to determine women's empowerment in ecotourism as well as opportunities to improve their beneficitation in this industry. The study therefore investigates whether women are being empowered through the ecotourism business.

METHODS

The study employed a quantitative (survey) research method and a descriptive cross-sectional research design. A descriptive cross-sectional research design according to Adanlawo and Chaka (2023) analyse information about a population at a specific point in time. Data were collected from four local municipalities in Umkhanyakude, namely Hlabisa, Jozini, Mtubatuba, and Umhlabuyalingana. A consolidated sample of 204 respondents was constructed using a combination of random sampling and purposive sampling. A descriptive statistical analysis technique was applied to interpret the results. Key variables used were: access to business information opportunities; being informed about Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE); support for women ecotourism enterprises; access to education and training; types of training received; and access to financial resources.

RESULTS

3.1 Access to business information opportunities

Worldwide, small businesses play a crucial role in advancing grassroots economic growth and equitable sustainable development (Nkomo and Adanlawo, 2023; Makena et al., 2014). The empowerment of women in the ecotourism business is therefore central to achieving this objective. Figure 1 reveals the access of women to business information opportunities.

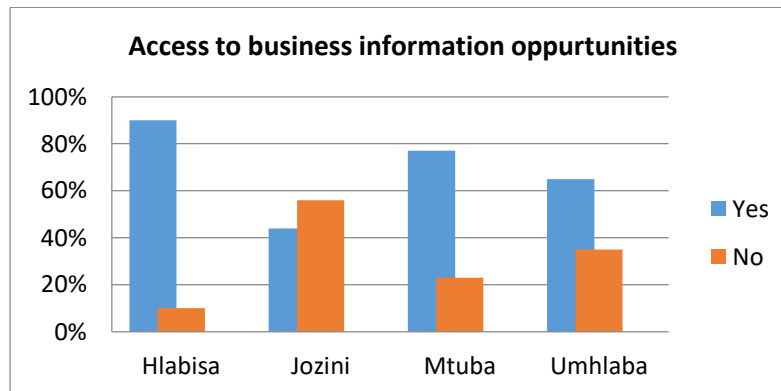


Figure 1: Access to business information

The results reveal that the majority of women in all four municipalities had access to relevant information that they could use to engage in either venture creation or self-employment activities. Easy and affordable access to relevant business information is critical to raising women's awareness about loan products and market risks and enabling them to evaluate market opportunities to facilitate business expansion. Adanlawo et al. (2021) argue that a lack of information prevents women-owned firms from realising their full potential.

3.2 Informed about BBEEE opportunities

One of the fundamental objectives of the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) policy is to advance economic transformation and enhance the economic participation of black people in the South African economy, including women (Musabayana and Mutambara, 2022). As indicated below (Figure 2), the respondents had different experiences with BBBEE opportunities in ecotourism projects.

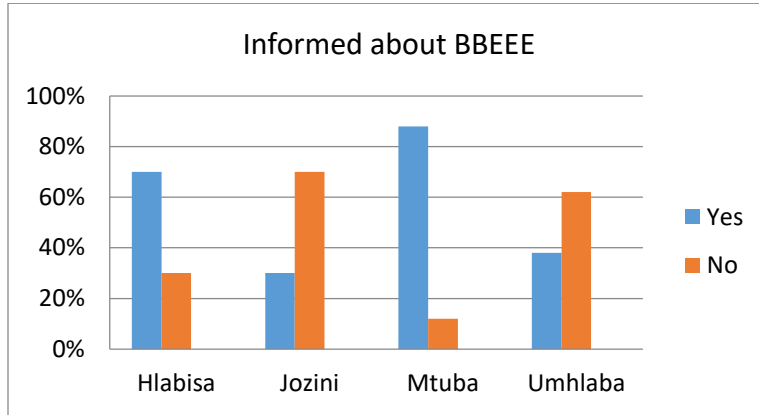


Figure 2: Informed about BBEEE

Overall, these results confirm that many women in Hlabisa (70%) and Mtubatuba (88%) had been informed about BEE opportunities in the local ecotourism industry. By contrast, Jozini (30%) and Umhlabuyalingana (38%) reported low perceptions of BEE opportunities, suggesting that BEE communication efforts were severely limited in these two local municipalities. In a related study, Mofokeng (2017) found that the tourism industry has been identified as one of the key drivers for economic development and transformation of the country; however, the sector is struggling to meet the transformation target of 30% as implementation of the transformation charter currently stands at 3%. Fortune-Spengane (2020) and Zondi et al. (2023) noted that funding, skills, and value creation are critical in ensuring that BBBEE ownership succeeds at the enterprise level. Another study by Pike et al. (2019) added that BBBEE contributed to tender corruption and economic strain, with many participants calling for restructuring of the BBBEE model to benefit the excluded majority.

3.3 Access to education and training opportunities

Business knowledge and skills have been found to be positively linked to venture creation (sources). For this reason, respondents were asked to report on their experiences regarding education and training opportunities in the ecotourism industry. Their responses were as follows:

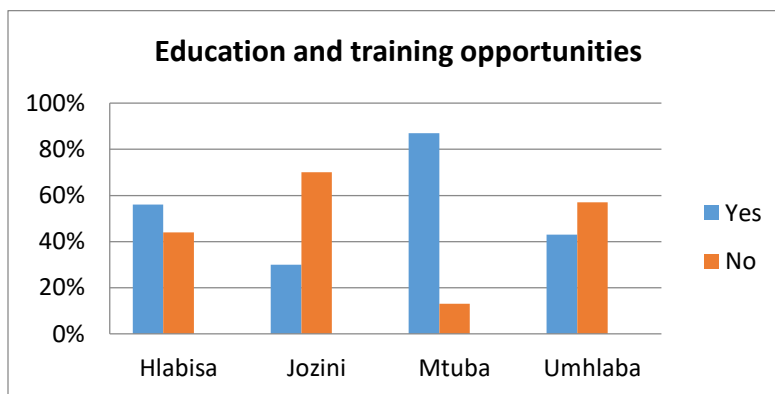


Figure 3: Education and training opportunities

Whether women entrepreneurs received education or not, varied across the four municipalities (Figure 3). Makena et al. (2014) found that in settings where socio-cultural norms constrain women’s freedoms and mobility, their ability to attend training or receive education is often compromised. Many women in developing countries remain illiterate and live in poor communities. Lack of education makes it difficult for these entrepreneurs to operate their ventures (Adanlawo, 2017).

3.4 Types of training received

In a follow-up question, the respondents were asked to give an example of the training that they received in ecotourism initiatives. The results, which were also corroborated by semi-structured interviews, revealed the following trends:

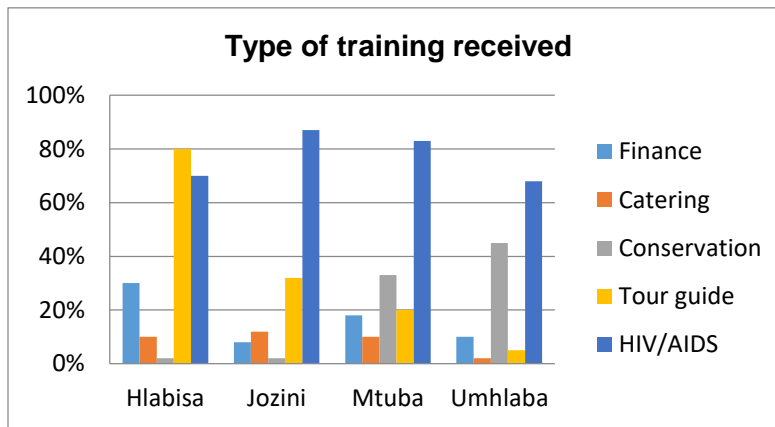


Figure 4: Type of training received

Training of the women in different fields also varied across the municipalities (Figure 4), with HIV/AIDS topping the chart. Despite gaps in areas like finance and catering, these results are corroborated by other empirical studies, which show that access to training and development opportunities is key to improving women’s skills and competencies (Nxopo, 2014; Irene, 2017).

3.5 Access to financial resources

Long-standing inequalities in the gender distribution of economic and financial resources have placed women at a disadvantage, relative to men in their capabilities to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from broader processes of development (Chaka and Adanlawo, 2023a).

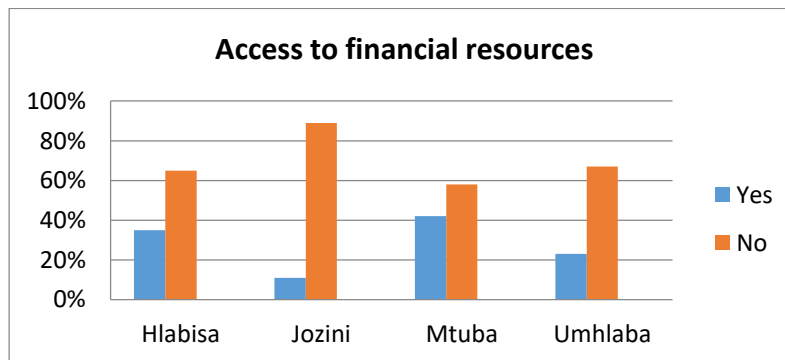


Figure 5: Access to financial resources

Figure 5 depicts that the majority of women across the four local municipalities had difficulty accessing financial resources. This challenge has also been confirmed by other empirical studies. For example, George-Ufot (2021) claims that inadequate resources or equipment prevented many women entrepreneurs from succeeding in their business ventures, as they could not produce the quality products required by the market due to a lack of raw materials.

3.6 Support for women ecotourism enterprises

Both material and moral support have been found to be critical in inspiring entrepreneurs to achieve their business goals. Women entrepreneurs in ecotourism projects across the four local municipalities described business support services as follows:

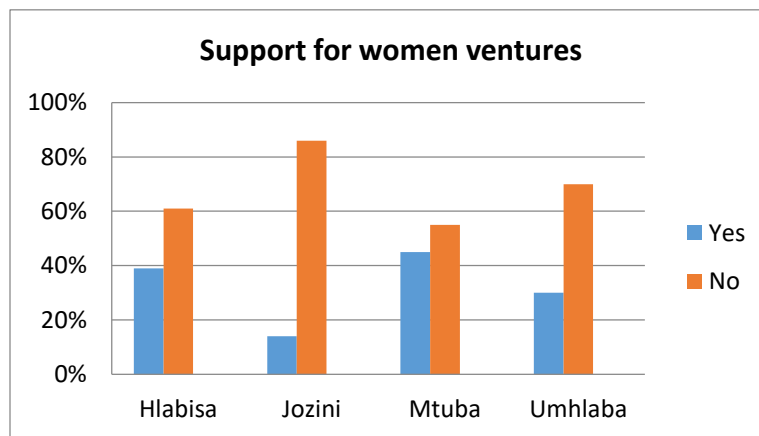


Figure 6: Support for women ventures

The lack of support for women entrepreneurs (Figure 6) in ecotourism is in conflict with the literature, which emphasises that it is vital for big businesses to provide incubation services to emerging entrepreneurs to stimulate their growth. Chili and Xulu (2015) urge all levels of government in South Africa to assume greater responsibility for, and involvement in tourism destination planning and sustainable development. But tourism policy initiatives often suffer from a lack of implementation (Chili and Xulu, 2015).

DISCUSSION

Women participation rates were generally higher across the four local municipalities, however, the spread of ecotourism benefits for women was generally uneven across the participating local municipalities; suggesting differences in ecotourism development. In spite of the disparities in women participation, ecotourism projects played a key role in meeting the development needs of women in all the surveyed local municipalities. This confirms the role of ecotourism in helping to reduce poverty and unemployment (Chapman, 2016; Deen et al., 2016). As regards women access to entrepreneurial opportunities, Hlabisa and Mtubatuba had a larger share of venture creation among women than Jozini and Umhlabuyalingana. This can be attributed to the fact women in these areas received support and business training from the municipalities, Wild Life Management Services and the local business chamber; which provided basic training to women entrepreneurs in areas like St. Lucia. Prevalence of women entrepreneurship in ecotourism is also confirmed by other researchers (Chaka and Adanlawo, 2022; Ghosh, 2022; and Alserhan et al., 2021). Tshabalala (2016) established that while women entrepreneurship in tourism was evident in Kwa-Zulu Natal, there were barriers in accessing finance and business training opportunities; which confined many of these entrepreneurs to the survivalist mode.

The increasing role of the business sector in supporting ecotourism entrepreneurship is also confirmed by Alfadhli (2020) who observed that wildlife/safari companies contributed to local economic development through capacitation of beneficiaries. At the time of conducting the study; Umhlabuyalingana Municipality was in the process of incorporating women into the Smangaliso World Heritage Programme as part of Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment and beneficiation of local communities. This initiative was spearheaded by local business, Wild Life Services and the local chiefs. The increasing role of Wild Life Services in supporting sustainable ecotourism development has been confirmed by other researchers (Kioko and Kiringe, 2010; Salman et al., 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrated that empowerment of women in ecotourism remains largely uneven. Women in formal venture creation activities were more likely to get assistance and support from established ecotourism enterprises and local municipalities, those engaged in informal ecotourism were unlikely to get support services partly due to lack of information; limited knowledge and skill and difficulty of accessing business opportunities. The study has enhanced understanding of the opportunities and constraints that impact women empowerment in ecotourism, as well as the gaps that needs to be addressed to enhance policy practice in this area.

In view of the above, the following initiatives may be considered to improve both provision and the quality of women empowerment services in the South African ecotourism industry:

- Support awareness building initiatives. These should target self-esteem, self-motivation, economic status and well-being; self-awareness, as well as autonomy and self-belief among women in ecotourism projects
- Improve supply of ecotourism business literature to women groups, focusing on the benefits of venture creation, financial planning and marketing to enable women to participate in decision-making processes at all levels of the ecotourism project.
- As part of women entrepreneurship, provide customized training and incubation programmes to help women groups master and apply principles of community-based sourcing to facilitate their participation in the ecotourism business supply chain
- Promote gender mainstreaming by creating an enabling environment with emphasis on equal rights, equitable access to development and career advancement opportunities and resources;
- Scale up provision of financial resources to enhance both design and implementation of women-focused empowerment initiatives to facilitate growth and sustainability of women owned ecotourism enterprises; including informal ecotourism activities that are currently marginalised.
- Align women empowerment initiatives with relevant support programmes in mainstream tourism to ensure congruence and uniformity in both practice and outcomes. This requires effective policy coordination in local economic development (LED) initiatives across sectors.
- Improve access to land through recognition of women's property rights and security tenure so that women can use land resources to improve their own lives. This can be achieved by linking ecotourism efforts with housing and agricultural programmes.

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