

Gender roles in tourism development in East Nusa Tenggara -Timor Leste border

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Abstract

Purpose: This research explores the challenges and opportunities of integrating a gender perspective into tourism development in the border regions of East Nusa Tenggara (ENT) and Timor Leste.

Research Methodology: Using a qualitative approach, this study collected data through literature reviews and stakeholder interviews.

Results: The analysis revealed that women face various obstacles to tourism sector development, such as limited access to capital, unequal job opportunities, and societal gender stereotypes. Despite these challenges, there are significant opportunities for women to enhance their participation in the tourism industry, potentially leading to increased wellbeing.

Limitations: This study acknowledges limitations, including the scope of qualitative research and the challenges in generalizing findings to broader contexts beyond ENT and Timor Leste.

Contributions: Based on these findings, this research proposes tourism development strategies focusing on inclusive gender vocational training programs; enhanced collaboration among government, private sector, and educational institutions; and promoting women's leadership and decision-making roles in tourism management.

Novelty: This study highlights the potential for more inclusive tourism development in the ENT-Timor Leste border region, with the aim of providing economic benefits to local communities.

Keywords: *Border Tourism, economic empowerment, inclusive tourism, participation, empowerment, street gender*

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1. Introduction

Tourism plays a crucial role in the Indonesian economy and has a significant impact on the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This is not only through revenue derived from international tourists, but also by creating job opportunities and encouraging regional development (Devitasari, Fasa, & Soeharto, 2022). A report from the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy shows an increase in tourism's contribution to GDP from 3.60 percent in 2022 to 3.83 percent in 2023. This increase confirms the important role of tourism in the national economic development strategy (Arijuddin and Nurwahidin, 2023).

The Provincial Government of East Nusa Tenggara (ENT) strategically designated tourism as a key driver of economic growth and regional development (Rachmawati, 2019). Known for its natural beauty and rich cultural diversity, the ENT Provincial Government can be considered quite successful in attracting an increasing number of domestic and international tourists (Pantola, 2023). The land of Timor Island, which geographically borders directly with Timor-Leste, has experienced the direct impact of prioritized border area development efforts initiated by the central government through the Nawacita program. These efforts are reflected in the vision, mission, and strategic plans of the local government at both the provincial and district levels, which have a direct impact on the economic development of border areas through the tourism sector. The construction of border crossing points,

equipped with adequate facilities at several points such as PBLN Motamasin in the Malaka Regency, Mota'ain in the Belu Regency, and PBLN Wini and Napan in the North Central Timor (NCT) Regency, has become a new magnetic attraction and has significantly contributed to the increase in the number of tourists visiting the border areas of East Nusa Tenggara (ENT) Province and Timor-Leste.

Tourism in East Nusa Tenggara Province has the potential not only to improve the local economy by increasing income and reducing poverty levels but also to have a strategic role in strengthening relations between Indonesia and Timor Leste (Rokhanyah, Noor, Harahap, Wijaya, & Amalia, 2023). The location of ENT Province, which directly borders Timor Leste, provides an opportunity to utilize the tourism sector as a soft diplomacy tool, which can strengthen cultural understanding and regional peace and facilitate economic cooperation between the two countries. According to Asthu (2020), this kind of initiative not only promotes tourism as a driving force for the economy, but also as a medium for building bridges between communities and economies on both sides of the border. Thus, tourism development in border areas is not only expected to improve local welfare but also contribute to harmony and cooperation across countries (Maulana, 2019).

In the dynamics of regional economic development in ENT Province, especially in border areas, the role of women is not only important but also strategic. They are not only involved as participants in the tourism industry but also play a key role in driving the economy and bringing innovation. Women in ENT contribute significantly to managing resources at the household and community scales, being active in producing and marketing unique tourism products, including crafts, culinary delights, and authentic cultural experiences. Based on data from BPS (2024), the female workforce in this province reached 45.59%, or the equivalent of 1,363,673 people out of a total workforce of 2,000,716. Despite their vital role, these contributions are often not reflected in formal economic statistics, highlighting the urgent need for greater recognition and appreciation of women's contributions (Yare 2021).

Although women play a fundamental role in the tourism sector of the East Nusa Tenggara border region, they often face significant obstacles that limit their contribution. *First*, limited access to capital and education hinders women's ability to start and develop tourism (Wirdawati et al. 2024). The important role played by women in the tourism sector of the East Nusa Tenggara border region is often limited by several significant obstacles. One of the main obstacles is women's limited access to capital and education (Poon, Thai, & Naybor, 2012).

Research conducted by Ndolu and Sulistiyono (2020) revealed that groups of female weavers in ENT Province experienced difficulties in accessing capital. The results of a survey conducted by Oxfam in 10 villages across 22 districts/cities showed that as much as 73.11 percent of women weavers' capital came from individuals (loan sharks), 23.44 percent from cooperatives, and only 6.39 percent from government banks. This condition emphasizes that women's access to more structured and guaranteed funding sources such as formal financial institutions is still limited. In addition, low access to education is a serious obstacle to increasing women's capacity and skills in effectively managing tourism businesses. These limitations directly affect women's ability to start and develop businesses in the tourism sector (Henry, Coleman, Orser, & Foss, 2022). The inability to access adequate financial capital hinders women from obtaining the resources necessary to start or expand their tourism business. In addition, low levels of education are also a serious obstacle, preventing women from accessing the knowledge and skills required for effective tourism business management (Baten, De Haas, Kempter, & Meier zu Selhausen, 2021).

Second, dominant cultural norms and values can curb women's freedom to fully participate in economic activities. Strong cultural norms and values are often deeply rooted in society and can limit women's freedom to fully engage in economic activities (Heintz, Kabeer, & Mahmud, 2018). This view of cultural norms becomes a significant obstacle, especially in the context of the tourism sector, where there are certain assumptions or expectations about women's more traditional roles, such as being caregivers or domestic workers (Pearse & Connell, 2016).

Strong cultural influences can produce binding expectations, limiting career choices and opportunities for women to develop outside of their traditionally assigned roles. The patriarchal culture in the community marriage system in East Nusa Tenggara Province indirectly places women in a backward group. In this marriage system, the dowry stipulated in the traditional agreement between two large families is the dominant thing. This was stated by Sumakud and Septyana (2020), Mataradja and Wibowo (2022), and Lolan and Sutriyawan (2023) As a result, women tend to be limited to domestic tasks such as breastfeeding, taking care of children, and other household tasks after marriage.

Third, limited access to technology and information is a barrier to exploiting digital tourism. In today's digital era, information technology plays a key role in facilitating tourism promotion, destination marketing, and the creation of unique and attractive tourism experiences for tourists (Gilbert, Masucci, Homko, & Bove, 2008). However, limited access to technology and information infrastructure in border areas often becomes a serious barrier for tourism entrepreneurs, including women, to adopt and utilize digital technology effectively (Marini, Hanum, & Sulistiyo, 2020). Research conducted by Setiaman, Chairany, and El Karimah (2018) explained that the cause of high poverty among women in ENT Province who are vulnerable and marginalized is disparities in access to information and technology. Likewise, the research report disclosed by Azali and Harsanti (2022) also emphasizes that variable access to information technology is significant in the high level of poverty in the agricultural sector in ENT Province. Apart from that, the low level of digital literacy among women can also hinder their ability to make maximum use of technology (Mametja, Lebambo, & Tichaawa, 2023). Therefore, efforts to overcome limited access to technology and information in border areas are important for increasing women's participation in digital tourism. This includes investments in technological infrastructure, training in the use of digital technology, and digital literacy programs that can empower women to take full advantage of available digital tourism opportunities (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2020).

In the context of tourism development in the border region between ENT Province and Timor Leste, the role of women is crucial to ensure inclusion and sustainability. Women have an in-depth local knowledge of the culture, traditions, and tourism potential of the region (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). Including women in the planning process ensures that the needs and aspirations of local communities, including women, are fully considered. In addition, women often become informal economic actors in the tourism sector, such as handicraft craftsmen or local food producers, who can make significant contributions to local tourism development (Movono & Dahles, 2017). By strengthening the role of women in decision making and empowering them through training and mentoring, tourism development in border areas can be more inclusive, sustainable, and provide equal benefits for the entire community (Jaiswal & Jaiswal, 2015).

Although there has been some research on tourism in the border areas of the ENT and Timor Leste Provinces, previous research tends to pay less attention to gender dimensions, especially the role of women in the tourism development process. Similar to the research conducted by Lay (2020), from a technical perspective, they raised the importance of accommodation facilities at the Fulan Fehan tourist location, Belu Regency. Likewise, research conducted by Siahaan et al. (2022) highlights the importance of English communication facilities in guiding foreign tourists at the Tanjung Bastian Wini tourist location, North Central Timor Regency (NCT). Furthermore, research conducted by Taleke and Jado (2023), reviews the development strategy for the Wini coastal tourist destination by identifying its strengths and weaknesses. Thus, this research offers a new and in-depth perspective on how the role of women can be strengthened and utilized in tourism development in border areas. By specifically considering gender factors, it is hoped that this research can provide more comprehensive and relevant insights for policymakers, tourism practitioners, and academics interested in border-region tourism development.

By considering the obstacles faced by women in the tourism sector in the border areas of ENT Province and Timor Leste, this research aims to make a significant contribution to understanding and handling these problems. The main objective of this research is to identify in depth the factors that limit women's participation in the tourism sector and propose strategies and concrete steps to overcome these obstacles.

Through an approach that focuses on understanding the local context and integrating a gender perspective, this study aims to provide a comprehensive and relevant view for public policy-making authorities, tourism practitioners, and academics to increase women's contributions to tourism development in border regions. Thus, it is hoped that the results of this research can become the basis for developing more effective strategies and policies to promote gender equality and strengthen the role of women in the tourism sector of the East Nusa Tenggara border region.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Border Tourism

Tourism in border areas has often become a research focus because of its unique characteristics and inherent challenges. Border tourism can enhance diplomatic relations between neighboring countries and promote local economic growth. Gao, Ryan, Cave, and Zhang (2019) and Su and Li (2021), demonstrate that tourism in border regions can function as a soft diplomacy tool, strengthening bilateral relations and cultural understanding among neighboring nations. In the border regions of East Nusa Tenggara (ENT) and Timor Leste, the establishment of Cross-Border Checkpoints has increased tourist flows, evident from the rise in international tourists from 1.4 million in 2022 to 1.6 million in 2023 (BPS, 2024).

Furthermore, border tourism not only plays a role in diplomatic contexts but also in infrastructure development and enhancing the well-being of local communities. A study by Wendt et al. (2021) indicates that investments in tourism infrastructure, such as roads, accommodations, and supporting facilities, are often more intensive in border areas to attract tourists and support cross-border trade. In ENT, the development of PBLNs such as Motamasin and Mota'ain has provided new access to local communities, creating economic opportunities through trade and tourism. Adequate infrastructure also improves mobility and accessibility, thereby attracting more tourists and investment.

Border tourism has the potential to promote regional economic integration and inclusive growth. According to research by Hardi, Kupa, Ocskay, and Szemerédi (2021), actively tourism-driven border areas often experience increased economic and social cooperation between communities on both sides of the border. This fosters an environment conducive to cultural and economic exchanges, which is highly beneficial for economically disadvantaged regions. In the border regions of ENT and Timor Leste, increased tourist flows and cross-border interactions have helped address some economic and social challenges, such as poverty and isolation.

Thus, border tourism not only brings direct economic benefits through increased tourist numbers and revenues but also plays a role in infrastructure development, enhancing diplomatic relations, and regional economic integration. This study focuses on the strategic role of border tourism in East Nusa Tenggara Province, highlighting how local development and empowerment can be maximized through inclusive and sustainable tourism strategies.

2.2 Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment is a process whereby individuals and communities are empowered to enhance their economic capacity and exert greater control over economic resources. Research has indicated that women play a crucial role in local economies, particularly in the tourism sector. Pastore, Webster, and Hope (2021) affirm that women's contributions often go unnoticed in formal economic statistics despite their significant role in managing resources at the household and community levels. In East Nusa Tenggara Province, women actively engage in producing and marketing unique tourism products including crafts, culinary delights, and authentic cultural experiences.

Furthermore, women in border areas often face challenges in accessing capital and education, limiting their ability to independently start and develop tourism businesses. Setiawan and Suwarningsyah (2014) highlight that women weavers in ENT Province struggle with access to capital, with the majority obtaining funds from individuals (loan sharks) rather than formal financial institutions, such as banks

or cooperatives. This underscores the need to enhance women's access to structured and secure financial resources.

Additionally, low levels of education pose a serious barrier for women in effectively managing tourism businesses. Limited education hinders women from developing the management and financial skills necessary to enhance their business competitiveness (Jovani 2019). This highlights the need for training and mentoring programs to build women's capacity and confidence in managing tourism enterprises.

In this context, economic empowerment strategies for women in the border tourism sector should address policy integration, which facilitates easier access to financial resources and education. These efforts may include developing specialized training programs, improving access to microfinance institutions, and advocating policies that support gender equality in asset ownership and market access.

Overall, empowering women economically in the tourism sector in the East Nusa Tenggara border regions is not only crucial for enhancing women's economic well-being directly but also for strengthening their contributions to broader local tourism development. The economic potential of women can be optimized by creating a supportive and inclusive environment to achieve sustainable and inclusive economic growth across border regions.

2.3 Inclusive Tourism

Inclusive tourism refers to efforts to ensure that all individuals, including marginalized groups, have equal opportunities to participate in and benefit from the tourism sector. Shantika, Ernawati, and Sarja (2021) emphasize the importance of involving women in tourism planning processes to ensure inclusion and sustainability. Abou-Shouk, Mannaa, and Elbaz (2021) also highlight that women often act as informal economic players who can significantly contribute to local tourism development. In the context of ENT, involving women in decision-making and empowering them through training and mentoring is key to achieving inclusive tourism.

The next steps to strengthen inclusive tourism in the East Nusa Tenggara border regions involve ensuring that tourism development policies and programs not only accommodate but also promote active participation and fair benefits for all layers of society, including women and vulnerable groups. Training and mentoring programs should be specifically designed to enhance women's skills and capacities in tourism business management and to provide better access to markets and financial resources (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

Furthermore, building strong partnerships between governments, the private sector, and civil society organizations is necessary to create a supportive environment for inclusive tourism. These partnerships can help in developing inclusive and sustainable policies, ensuring that the voices and aspirations of women and other marginalized groups are heard and integrated into every stage of tourism planning and implementation (Nyanjom, Boxall, & Slaven, 2018).

Moreover, advocacy to raise awareness and understanding of the importance of inclusion in border tourism is required. This includes educating stakeholders about the benefits of inclusion for sustainable economic growth and social stability in the border regions. Thus, governments and communities can collaborate to create an environment conducive to tourism that not only benefits economically, but is also inclusive for all individuals and groups in East Nusa Tenggara Province.

2.4 Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are specific prejudices or perceptions of the roles and abilities of both men and women. Research shows that gender stereotypes can limit women's freedom to participate fully in economic activities. The patriarchal culture within the marriage system in East Nusa Tenggara Province, as highlighted by Seba (2016), Sumakud and Septyana (2020), and Bire and Radja (2023), often places women in less advantageous positions. These traditional views often hinder women from participating in the tourism sector as both entrepreneurs and workers.

Strategic steps can be taken to address gender stereotypes and strengthen women's roles in tourism in the East Nusa Tenggara border regions. First, the public's continuous education on gender equality and addressing stereotypes that inhibit women's participation in economic activities is crucial. Educational programs and awareness campaigns can help change perceptions and cultural norms that restrict women (David 2015).

Second, policies and regulations supporting gender equality should be consistently strengthened and implemented. Governments can play a pivotal role in formulating policies that support women's access to economic opportunities, including in the tourism sector. This includes providing incentives for companies that employ more women, ensuring equality in promotional opportunities, and expanding women's access to necessary training and education (Fennell & Arnot, 2008).

Third, actively involving women in decision-making and strategic tourism planning is key to ensuring that their needs and aspirations are reflected in every tourism development initiative (Aragonés-González, Rosser-Limiñana, & Gil-González, 2020). By strengthening women's capacities in management and leadership, they can play a more active role in designing and implementing programs that support inclusive and sustainable tourism in the East Nusa Tenggara Province.

With a holistic and sustainable approach, it is expected that the gender stereotypes that hinder women from realizing their full potential in the tourism sector in border regions can be overcome. This will create a fairer and more inclusive environment for all individuals, making tourism a true driver of economic growth for the communities of the East Nusa Tenggara Province.

3. Research Methodology

This qualitative study explores the gender dynamics in tourism development in the border zone between the East Nusa Tenggara (ENT) Province and Timor Leste. Using a systematically designed and in-depth methodology, the research objective is to reveal how gender influences tourism sector development and how this can influence more inclusive and sustainable development strategies. The research is located in the land border area of Timor Island, ENT, and Timor Leste Provinces, where the areas include Kupang Regency, North Central Timor (NCT), Belu and Malaka Regency, where the research was carried out for three months starting from January to March 2024. To provide an overview of the research location, it was created in the form of a map image visualization below.



Figure 1. Map of Border Districts of Timor Island and Timor Leste
Source: ArcGis 2024 Design Results

The first step in this research was to conduct an extensive literature review by accessing academic databases, such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Keywords such as "gender influence in tourism", "tourism development in border areas", and "ENT-Timor Leste tourism development" were

used for the period 2006 to 2023. The focus of the literature selection was on thematic relevance, contribution to understanding the influence of gender, and specific geographic context (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013).

For in-depth interviews, this research targeted 10-15 key stakeholders in the border tourism sector of the ENT-Timor Leste Province, including academics, tourism entrepreneurs, government officials, gender activists, and community leaders. The selected respondents were still expected to be representatives from the border area of Timor Island with Timor Leste. The selection criteria included their contribution to the tourism sector or gender advocacy, as well as their expertise on the research topic. A selection process conducted through industry recommendations and literature reviews ensures diversification and a depth of perspective.

Interview questions, developed based on a theoretical framework and literature review, were aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and recommendations regarding gender integration in tourism development. Interviews conducted in Indonesian or local languages, either in person or online, lasted 45–60 minutes. Strict ethical protocols, including informed consent and anonymization, ensured the confidentiality and comfort of participants (Williams, Burnap, Sloan, Jessop, & Lepps, 2017).

Data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using qualitative coding techniques with the help of NVivo software, enabling the systematic identification of themes. The iterative and reflective analysis process ensures the accuracy and depth of data interpretation, revealing the complexity of gender influences on tourism development (Neale 2016). Triangulation techniques include data, investigators, theory, and methodology to strengthen the reliability of findings. Checking by participants allowed them to provide feedback on the interpretation of the findings, thereby increasing the accuracy and credibility of the study.

This study proactively identified limitations, including challenges in generalizing the findings and potential bias in the interpretation of qualitative data. Awareness of these limitations is crucial to understanding the context and application of research findings (Baum, 2018). The methodology adopted in this study is designed to provide in-depth and valuable insights into the role of gender in the development of the tourism sector in the border region of ENT-Timor Leste Province. This qualitative approach prioritizes understanding the subjective experiences and perspectives of participants, contributing to academic and practical discussions on gender-inclusive and sustainable tourism development.

4. Results and discussions

4.1. Barriers and Challenges to Tourism Sector Development Based on a Gender Perspective

The border region in East Nusa Tenggara Province, which includes the districts of Kupang, North Central Timor, Belu, and Malacca, is adjacent to Timor Leste, including the Oecusse enclave. According to the provisions in Presidential Regulation No. 179 of 2014 concerning Regional Spatial Planning for National Border Areas, this area is designated as the main driver of spurring economic growth in the border zone. This involves its role as a gateway and center for new economic development. In particular, the potential of the tourism sector in the border areas of ENT and Timor Leste, which are rich in natural beauty and cultural uniqueness, has been identified as one of the main assets that can encourage and strengthen economic development in this region. This approach not only aims to strengthen connectivity and accessibility between regions but also to promote and optimize the value of tourism as a source of sustainable economic growth (Nalle, 2018).

Even though the tourism potential in the border region of ENT and Timor Leste is promising, several obstacles and challenges need to be overcome to maximize the development of this sector, especially from a gender perspective. These challenges include inequalities in access to economic opportunities, the limited representation of women in leadership and decision-making positions in the tourism sector,

and social and cultural norms that limit women's participation in the tourism economy (Mekarini, 2015). To understand this in depth, this is explained more comprehensively below.

4.1.1. Access to Resources and Training

Unequal access between women and men to economic resources such as education, training, and capital is one of the main challenges. This hinders women's ability to fully participate in the tourism sector, either as workers or entrepreneurs. The inequality of access between women and men to economic resources, including education, training, and capital, stands out as a significant challenge to encouraging women's full participation in the tourism industry. These challenges not only reduce individual potential, but also limit the overall growth of the tourism sector, which can be achieved through the optimal use of human resources (Ahmed & Kiester, 2021).

Education and training play crucial roles in preparing individuals to enter and compete in the tourism market. Unfortunately, women often face barriers in accessing quality education and training opportunities due to economic factors, domestic responsibilities, or social norms that discriminate against women in education. As a result, women become less competitive and tend to be trapped in low-wage, low-status tourism jobs, which provide fewer opportunities for career growth (Thitthongkam, 2011). According to the latest data from the Central Statistics Agency of East Nusa Tenggara Province in 2023, although the female workforce is evenly distributed in various economic sectors and even dominates sectors such as the processing industry, trade, government services, education, and health in greater numbers than men, their contributions often go unrecognized. This is exacerbated by gender stereotypes that depict women as marginalized groups. This information can be clarified using the data visualization presented below.

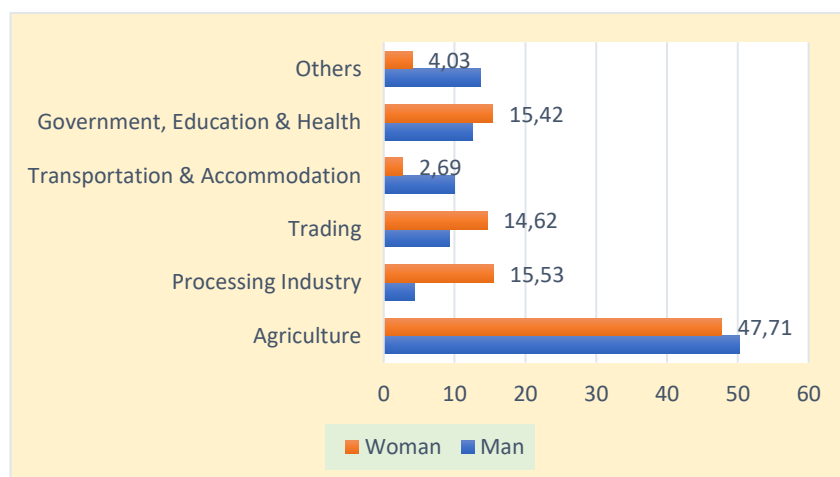


Figure 2. Percentage of Workers by Main Field of Employment and Gender of ENT Province in 2023

Although the contribution of the female workforce to the economy in East Nusa Tenggara Province is quite large, the majority of this workforce consists of individuals with low levels of education and skills. Based on the latest data from the Central Statistics Agency, of the total workforce of 2.82 million people, the percentage of female workers with an educational background equivalent to elementary school only reached 48.37%, which is higher than that of men, is at 44.56%. This indicates that although women play a significant role in the economic sector, their productivity levels tend to be low because of limitations in expertise and skills.

The situation described previously regarding the dominance of women in the workforce, who tend to have lower levels of education and skills, creates an unfavorable circle. In this circle, women not only face difficulties in exploiting economic opportunities but are also limited in making meaningful contributions to the tourism industry (Ayuningsasi, Saraswaty, & Saientisna, 2023). This hinders economic empowerment for women and the tourism sector from utilizing its full potential. Providing

women with equal access to education and training will pave the way for them to bring innovation and skills that can increase the competitiveness and sustainability of the tourism industry. To better understand this approach, it is important to explore the programs offered by the relevant Technical Services to ensure that the initiatives are appropriate and to support the needs of the community in developing tourism in the border areas of ENT and Timor Leste. This is why the opinion of the Secretary of the North Central Timor District Tourism Office is relevant in this context:

"We at the Tourism Office have initiated a series of training and empowerment programs, especially for women in border areas. The aim is to increase their capacity in the tourism industry, which we believe can significantly contribute to local economic growth. However, we faced several challenges in the implementation of this program. One of the greatest obstacles is the limited regional budget available for this activity. An inadequate budget means that we have to work hard in allocating existing resources to achieve the expected results. In addition, we observed that women's participation in our training programs was still relatively low. This could be due to a variety of factors, including domestic responsibilities which are still considered a top priority for many women in our region, as well as a lack of awareness of the importance of this training for their career development in the tourism sector."

Based on the results of the interview above, there are several things that all stakeholders need to pay attention to in order to realize gender-based inclusive tourism sector development. Baum (2018) emphasized the importance of investment in human resources as the main key to developing the tourism sector. This includes empowering women through education and training, which not only increases individual capacity, but also provides broad benefits for society and local economic growth. The regional budget constraints faced by the Tourism Department, as revealed in the interviews, highlight the challenges in effective resource allocation to meet the needs of inclusive tourism development. According to Graci (2020), solutions to these problems can be found through cooperation and strategic partnerships between local governments, the private sector, and international donor agencies to raise necessary funds and resources.

Furthermore, the low participation of women in the training programs reflects broader social and cultural challenges that often hinder women's empowerment in the tourism sector. Hao, Zhang, and Xiao (2021) suggested that to increase women's participation, it is important to hold outreach and advocacy sessions targeting both women and men in the community. This will help change perceptions of gender roles and demonstrate the direct benefits of women's economic empowerment for families and communities.

Strategic interventions, including the development of education and training programs designed to meet women's needs, are needed to overcome these barriers. Such programs should consider the unique barriers women face, such as flexible training schedules, childcare support, and courses targeted at specific skills that increase women's employability in the tourism industry. Additionally, it is important to change social norms that discriminate against women in education and employment through awareness and advocacy campaigns that involve all stakeholders, including the government, tourism industry, educational institutions, and society (Hlalele & Brexa, 2015).

4.1.2. Access to Capital

Access to capital is one of the main pillars for developing businesses in the tourism industry, but women entrepreneurs in this field often face obstacles in obtaining loans or investments (Wijayanti & Dewi, 2016). This is due to the lack of collateral and gender bias of financial institutions, which limits their capacity to start or expand tourism businesses, reducing the possibility of diversification and innovation (Brandão, Breda, & Costa, 2019). In a dialogue with Antara News, Lien Adriana, Head of the Women's and Children's Empowerment Service in East Nusa Tenggara Province, revealed that women in ENT Province experience significant difficulties in accessing loan funds from banks. According to Adriany, this affects their ability to build a family economy independently and contributes to the prevalence of

poverty in ENT Province. The factor of the husband's dominance as the head of the household often makes it difficult for women to obtain business capital because the loan guarantee conditions usually have to be in the husband's name. This situation emphasizes the need for more inclusive and supportive strategies from financial institutions to strengthen the role of women in the tourism industry and family economic development (Trisanti, Nurhaeni, Mulyanto, & Sakuntalawati, 2022).

In an online interview with one of the culinary business owners at a popular tourist location in Wini Beach, North Central Timor Regency (NCT), he explained the challenges he faced in accessing capital to develop his business.

"Getting loans from banks is very difficult for us, especially because of the strict collateral requirements they set. Most of us do not have enough assets to use as collateral, making this option almost impossible. As a result, many business owners are forced to look for alternative financing that often comes from loan sharks, even though we are aware that the interest charged is very high. We are often trapped in a cycle of large debts because interest in loans from loan sharks reaches very high figures, far above what we should bear. This is not just slows down the growth of our business but can threaten our survival."

The contrast between field findings and expected ideal conditions creates a significant dilemma for local economic development through the tourism sector, especially in Wini Beach, North Central Timor Regency (NCT). Field findings reveal that local culinary business owners struggle to access capital because of obstacles in the form of strict collateral requirements from financial institutions, which are not in line with their realities. This situation forces them to look for alternative sources of financing with very high loan interests, which worsens their economic condition. Theoretically, ideal conditions for supporting local economic growth through tourism include easy and fair access to capital and financial resources for all entrepreneurs, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This requires the cooperation and commitment of all stakeholders, including governments, financial institutions, and local communities, to create a more inclusive and sustainable financing system (Alemayehu, 2020). Strategies that can be implemented include simplifying loan requirements for SMEs, providing interest subsidies, and developing special financial products tailored to local business needs and conditions (Kimbu, Ngoasong, Adeola, & Afenyo-Agbe, 2020).

Furthermore, innovative steps are needed to increase financial literacy among small and medium business owners, as well as the development of social security schemes that can minimize risks for financial institutions and business owners (Pangastuti, Nalle, Rado, & Kolo, 2023). Thus, stakeholders must collaborate to identify solutions that not only solve the problem of access to capital, but also support long-term sustainability and economic growth in the tourism sector. Through this holistic and inclusive approach, the economic potential of the tourism sector, especially in tourist locations such as Wini Beach, can be optimized. This will empower local business owners and provide wider economic benefits for local communities, supporting the vision of inclusive, sustainable, and equitable local economic development (Chiluwa, 2023).

4.1.3. Gender Norms and Stereotypes

Deep-seated social norms and gender stereotypes play a role in limit women's employment opportunities in the tourism sector. There is a general perception that women are better suited to certain roles, often considered less prestigious or of lower economic value. This hinders women's ability to progress in their careers and reduces diversity and innovation in the tourism sector (Díaz-Carrión & Vizcaino-Suarez, 2021). Existing social norms and gender stereotypes influence women's employment opportunities in the tourism sector and shape perceptions of their value and contribution to this industry. As a result, women are often excluded from opportunities to participate in broader and more profitable economic activities such as tourism business ownership or managerial positions. These limitations not only limit an individual's growth potential but also the potential innovation and diversity they can bring to the tourism sector (Díaz-Meneses, Vilkaitė-Vaitonė, & Estupiñan-Ojeda, 2020).

Overcoming gender stereotypes and social norms is critical in encouraging inclusive and sustainable tourism development. Recognizing and fully utilizing women's capacities and contributions can lead to increased creativity and innovation as well as the development of broader and more inclusive tourism products and services (Biddulph & Scheyvens, 2018). This not only increases the competitiveness of tourism destinations but also improves the welfare and economic empowerment of women in local communities.

In the social and cultural context of the East Nusa Tenggara region, a strong patriarchal structure, especially in the traditional marriage system, has a significant impact on women's roles and access to various aspects of life, including the tourism sector. Local culture and customs often position women in a more passive role, where they are more involved in domestic work and have fewer opportunities to participate in economic activities outside the home, including in the tourism industry (Sumakud & Septyana, 2020). This is reinforced by the results of an interview with an academic and cultural expert in Kupang City, who gave a view of the customary marriage system of the ENT community, which creates discrimination against women in everyday life. He reviewed this from an anthropological and cultural perspective, where the interview excerpt is as follows:

"The marriage system in East Nusa Tenggara society has deep cultural roots, which without realizing it often contributes to discriminatory practices against women. In many cases, traditions and customs place women in a more passive position where they are expected to take on domestic roles and be less involved in public or economic activities. This not only limits women's access to economic and social opportunities, but also downplays their role in development and decision-making in communities. For example, in some customary systems, beliefs (dowry) or marriage fines often reinforce the view that women are 'objects' that are exchanged. This view indirectly reaffirms unequal gender-power structures and hinders efforts to achieve gender equality. For changing this paradigm, we need to reflect and re-evaluate our cultural practices in a way that respects tradition but also promotes equality and empowerment of women."

From the perspective of participatory regional development theory, ideal conditions require every member of society, including women, to have equal opportunities to contribute to the development process. This includes equal access to resources, education, and economic opportunities, as well as an active role in decisions that affect communities. In the context of the East Nusa Tenggara society, transformation to this ideal condition requires changes in cultural norms and practices that traditionally limit women's roles (Nurtjahyo, 2020).

Implementing participatory development principles requires a holistic approach that integrates women as key stakeholders at all stages of regional development, from planning to implementation and evaluation. This means creating mechanisms that allow women to share ideas, express needs, and propose solutions, as well as ensuring that they have access to the training and resources necessary to implement these ideas. In addition, the recognition of the economic and social value of women's contributions to regional development is very important. This includes valuing women's domestic work and social roles as assets that contribute to social well-being and stability, as well as facilitating women's participation in broader economic sectors, such as tourism, agriculture, and creative industries (Khalil, 2018).

To achieve these ideal conditions, collaboration is needed between the government, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and local communities to develop policies and programs that support gender equality. These initiatives could include legal reforms that support women's rights, awareness campaigns to change public perceptions, and the provision of facilities and services that support women's participation such as childcare and support for women entrepreneurs. Through an inclusive, participatory approach, regional development will not only be more sustainable but also more equitable, ensuring that all members of society, regardless of gender, can fully contribute to the growth and progress of their communities (Farhan & Anwar, 2016).

4.2. Gender inclusive tourism development strategy and its impact on local economic development in the ENT-timor ester border area.

Gender-inclusive tourism development strategies make an important contribution in encouraging local economic growth. Through an approach that values and combines the contributions and needs of both men and women fairly, a dynamic and sustainable tourism ecosystem can be created. Gender integration in every aspect of tourism development from planning to execution not only guarantees equal opportunities for all to develop and progress but also enriches the tourism sector with a wider diversification of products and services (Sinha et al., 2023). Additionally, this approach encourages inclusivity and active participation from all members of society, ensuring that tourism development effectively contributes to improving community welfare. Thus, gender-inclusive strategies in tourism not only advance equality and social justice, but also strengthen the foundations for inclusive and sustainable economic growth, creating added value for tourism destinations and local communities as a whole. This creates a win-win environment for all parties, where economic development goes hand in hand with improving the quality of life and empowering communities (Bakker, van der Duim, Peters, & Klomp, 2023).

In the context of gender-inclusive tourism development, especially in the ENT-Timor Leste border region, several important aspects are key to increasing the tourism sector's contribution to local economic development. These three aspects include improving the quality of tourism services, empowering local communities, and improving socio-economic sustainability. An integrated approach to implementing a gender-inclusive tourism development strategy not only guarantees justice and equality for all genders, but also maximizes the potential of tourism as a driving force for sustainable economic development (Cruz et al., 2018). The following is a further elaboration of these three aspects, which will explore how each dimension can significantly influence and strengthen local economic development in border areas while bringing broad social benefits to local communities.

4.2.1. Improving the Quality of Tourism Services

Improving the quality of tourism services in the ENT-Timor Leste border region plays an important role in creating attractive and competitive destinations. This strategy requires increasing the capacity and skills of workers in the tourism sector, covering various aspects from hospitality to destination management and digital marketing. By providing appropriate and focused training, especially one that focuses on gender equality, women and men can gain the knowledge and skills needed to improve service standards (Vapnyarskaya and Krivosheeva 2020). One concrete step that can be taken is the development of gender-inclusive vocational training programs, where women are given equal opportunities to explore fields such as tourism management, tourism information technology, and culinary and local cultural skills. This will not only enhance individual competency but also inspire innovation in creating unique and authentic tourism experiences, which is an added value for the destination (Acevedo, Cruces, Gertler, & Martinez, 2020).

The development of gender-inclusive vocational training programs aims not only to balance learning opportunities between women and men, but also to integrate diverse perspectives and expertise into the tourism industry. This is important because women often bring unique and insightful perspectives on the local culture and traditions, which can be translated into innovative and engaging tourism products or services. Thus, training that targets both genders can enrich the tourism industry with new ideas and a broader approach to tourism product development. Furthermore, the success of such initiatives depends on the building of a supportive ecosystem. This includes the creation of networks between training graduates, tourism entrepreneurs, and service suppliers, thus enabling collaboration and knowledge exchange. For example, digital platforms can be used as a means to facilitate meetings between stakeholders, offer opportunities for women to market their products or services, and provide access to the latest information on tourism industry trends (Üngüren, Kaçmaz, & Kahveci, 2015).

It is also important to ensure that financial support policies and practices are adapted to accommodate the specific needs of female entrepreneurs in tourism. This could take the form of microfinance schemes or subsidies specifically designed to help women start or expand their businesses in the tourism sector

(Iwu and Nxopo 2015). By providing easily accessible financial support, women are empowered to apply the knowledge and skills gained from training, driving the growth of their businesses and, in turn, strengthening the local economy. Furthermore, strengthening collaboration between the government, private sector, and educational institutions in designing training curricula relevant to current market needs is a vital step. This includes the introduction of best practices for customer service, sustainability, and digital marketing, all of which are important in the modern tourism era. This collaboration is essential to ensure that education and training not only provide participants with the latest knowledge and skills but also encourage women's active participation in the tourism industry. Through a curriculum that embraces gender diversity, training can facilitate the development of talent and innovations that reflect the needs and perspectives of both genders (Song et al., 2016).

Integrating gender equality principles in training materials, including quality customer service, sustainability practices, and effective digital marketing strategies, is important to prepare a workforce that is not only able to meet market expectations but also sensitive to social and environmental issues. This helps create a holistic workforce where women and men are equally equipped to contribute to responsible and inclusive tourism development. Implementing collaboration in curriculum development can also create opportunities for internships and job training programs that provide a space for women to apply their knowledge in real industrial contexts, thereby increasing their confidence and practical skills. This initiative not only enriches the learning experience, but also builds a bridge between theory and practice, strengthening synergies between educational institutions and tourism industry stakeholders (Vanner, 2023).

Government policy support that recognizes and promotes gender equality in tourism development is essential to ensure the effective implementation of such initiatives (Gillovic & McIntosh, 2020). Such policies could include adequate budget allocations for gender-based training, incentives for companies that implement equal employment practices, and recognition of skills certification acquired through training programs (Bruce, Battista, Plankey, Johnson, & Marshall, 2015). Thus, an integrated approach that prioritizes gender inclusivity in tourism human resource development will not only strengthen the position of women in this sector, but also increase the competitiveness and sustainability of tourism in the ENT-Timor Leste border region.

4.2.2. Local Community Empowerment

Empowering local communities is a crucial aspect of a gender-inclusive tourism development strategy in the ENT-Timor Leste border region. This approach focuses on the importance of recognizing and appreciating the roles and contributions of both genders in local economic development through the tourism sector. Through empowerment, especially among women, this strategy aims to increase their involvement in various aspects of the tourism industry, from business ownership to participation in the decision-making processes. Empowering local communities requires capacity building that targets both genders by providing access to entrepreneurship training, business management, and industry-specific skills, such as homestay management, culinary arts, and handicrafts. These programs should be designed with women's specific needs in mind, including flexibility in the timing and location of training, as well as support to overcome social or domestic barriers that may hinder their participation (Daniel, Costa, Pita, & Costa, 2017).

Empowering local communities also involves developing support mechanisms that facilitate women's access to financial resources. Initiatives such as microcredit, savings and credit cooperatives, and other financial assistance schemes can provide women with the capital they need to start or develop tourism businesses. This financing scheme must be sensitive to women's conditions, with terms that are not burdensome or affordable (Orser, Riding, & Manley, 2006). In addition, strengthening the networks between female tourism entrepreneurs and local and international markets is important. Building partnerships with travel agents, hotels, and restaurants can provide more opportunities for the products and services developed by women. Exhibitions, festivals, and online platforms can be used as effective promotional tools to increase the visibility of women-owned businesses.

Finally, the successful empowerment of local communities in a gender context requires commitment from the government and all stakeholders to recognize the importance of gender equality in tourism development. This can be achieved through supportive policies, advocacy to change discriminatory social norms, and public education on the importance of gender equality and empowerment. By supporting the empowerment of local communities from a gender perspective, the ENT-Timor Leste border region can develop a tourism sector that is not only sustainable but also inclusive, utilizing the diversity and full potential of local communities to produce equitable economic growth and improve community welfare.

4.2.3. Socioeconomic Sustainability

To encourage socio-economic sustainability in the ENT-Timor Leste border region, applying a gender perspective in the development of the tourism sector is essential. Sustainability is not only concerned with preserving natural and cultural resources, but also with creating fair and equitable economic opportunities for all members of society, especially women, who often face greater barriers to accessing economic opportunities.

Gender-inclusive socioeconomic sustainability in the tourism sector can be achieved through several main strategies. *First*, it develops and supports community-based tourism initiatives, which not only involve local communities in management, but also ensure that women play a significant role in leadership and decision-making. This creates a more inclusive tourism model, where the profits earned can directly contribute to improving the welfare of local communities, including women and their families. Developing community-based tourism initiatives is a crucial first step toward creating an inclusive and participatory tourism structure. This step recognizes the importance of involving local communities, especially women, in all aspects of tourism management, from planning to implementation and evaluation. Ensuring women's active role in leadership and decision-making not only respects the principle of gender equality, but also enriches the tourism sector from diverse perspectives and approaches (A. M. Bullough, 2008).

This community-based tourism model allows profits derived from tourism activities to return to the community in a way that directly improves the socioeconomic well-being of local communities. Women's involvement in this process is crucial considering their central role in the family and community economy. When women are empowered as leaders and decision-makers, they can ensure that profits from tourism are channeled into initiatives that support family and community needs such as education, health, and infrastructure (A. Bullough, Kroeck, Newbury, Kundu, & Lowe, 2012). In addition, the involvement of women in community-based tourism can encourage the development of more innovative products and services, which reflects the richness of local culture and wisdom. This not only increases the attractiveness of tourism destinations but also promotes cultural preservation and sustainable practices (Lusetyowati 2015).

Second, sustainable tourism practices should be promoted to consider the social and environmental impacts. This includes initiatives such as ecological tourism, agrotourism, and cultural tourism that not only protect natural resources and cultural heritage but also provide economic opportunities for women through the provision of local services and products. In this way, women can be directly involved in the tourism economy as workers, entrepreneurs, or policymakers. Promoting sustainable tourism practices that directly involve women in the tourism economy has the potential to have a significant positive impact on local economic and social development. Through initiatives such as ecological tourism, agrotourism, and cultural tourism, women can utilize their skills and knowledge of the environment and local culture. This not only supports the preservation of the environment and cultural heritage but also ensures that the economic benefits of tourism are spread more evenly across society (Thitthongkam, 2011). The integration of women into the development and management of sustainable tourism initiatives allows them to play a variety of critical roles. For example, in agritourism, women can leverage their skills in sustainable agriculture and food processing to create unique experiences for tourists while promoting food security and stable income for their families. Meanwhile, in ecological

and cultural tourism, women can act as tour guides, homestay managers, or craftspeople, leveraging their local knowledge to offer tourists authentic experience.

Third, it ensures access to gender-inclusive education and training in tourism and sustainability. Adequate education and training enable women to improve their skills, not only in the operational aspects of tourism, but also in sustainability management. This is critical to building the local capacity to respond to sustainability challenges and exploit opportunities emerging from the tourism sector. In this context, education and training programs should be designed to meet the needs of women in the tourism industry, including accessibility, relevance, and inclusivity. This includes a curriculum that covers aspects such as tourism management, marketing, environmental sustainability, and awareness of gender issues. Through a gender-inclusive approach, education and training can help overcome gender disparities in access to and participation in the tourism sector (Costa et al. 2013).

Finally, strengthening the policy framework that supports gender equality in all aspects of tourism development is essential for achieving socio-economic sustainability. These policies should include the protection of women's rights, incentives for small businesses owned or managed by women, and mechanisms to ensure that the economic benefits of tourism are fairly distributed among all members of society (Biddulph & Scheyvens, 2018). Through an integrated and gender-focused approach, socioeconomic sustainability in the tourism sector can create a strong foundation for local economic development that is not only fair and inclusive but also responsible for the environment and society. This approach allows the ENT-Timor Leste border region to develop a sustainable tourism sector where women play a key role in creating and exploiting economic opportunities while maintaining social balance and environmental sustainability.

5. Conclusion

The development of the tourism sector in the border region of East Nusa Tenggara (ENT) and Timor Leste demonstrates that a gender-inclusive approach is crucial for achieving sustainable local economic development. This research asserts that by recognizing and empowering women's roles in the tourism industry and integrating gender perspectives into all aspects of tourism development, we can create a more inclusive tourism model that provides significant benefits to local communities.

The active involvement of women in tourism decision-making and ensuring their rights to fully participate in the local economy are key to overcoming gender stereotypes and strengthening their capacity in the tourism industry. However, significant challenges remain, including expanding access to education and training that aligns with inclusive gender perspectives, as well as transforming cultural norms that hinder women's participation.

5.1. Limitations

Nevertheless, several limitations need to be acknowledged in efforts to achieve gender-inclusive tourism in border regions. One of these is the challenge of changing cultural norms, which hinders the active participation of women in the tourism industry. Access to education and training that aligns with inclusive gender perspectives remains a major constraint. Finally, the sustainability of these initiatives requires sustained support from various stakeholders, including the government, private sector, and civil society.

5.2. Recommendations

Concrete steps are needed to address these limitations and implement gender-inclusive tourism development strategies in border regions. First, there is a need for further efforts to promote vocational training programs that integrate gender perspectives, thus enabling women to develop skills relevant to the tourism industry. Second, enhancing cooperation between the government, private sector, and educational institutions to provide broader access to gender-inclusive education and training is crucial. Third, it is important to encourage women's participation in leadership and decision-making regarding tourism management, ensuring that their voices are fairly represented, and influencing policies that support sustainable and inclusive tourism development.

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