

The Hidden Power of Rural Tourism in Reducing Rural Poverty: Women

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Abstract

Rural poverty is defined as a crisis that encompasses not only insufficient income but also multidimensional social pathologies such as chronic unemployment, limited access to basic necessities, high crime rates, and health problems. This approach reveals that poverty is a structural deprivation rather than an individual failure. Rural tourism is of strategic importance in terms of diversifying local income streams, increasing employment, and encouraging new entrepreneurship models. Through these activities, it is possible to improve women's socio-economic status and minimize regional development disparities. Furthermore, rural tourism's stabilizing effect on demographic mobility (migration) offers a critical solution mechanism in the fight against rural poverty. In short, rural tourism plays a leading role in eliminating rural poverty. In fulfilling this role, women who live in rural areas are utilized. The aim of this study is to demonstrate the significant role that women, who are often marginalized in rural areas, play in reducing rural poverty in the context of rural tourism. Women residing in rural areas play a catalytic role in implementing the economic, ecological, and social dimensions of sustainable development. The socio-economic empowerment of women not only increases individual or household welfare, but also creates a macroeconomic leverage effect by raising total factor productivity and social welfare parameters.

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Introduction

Poverty, one of humanity's most fundamental crises throughout history, has been the focus of academic interest since the 18th century with the spread of capitalist modes of production. Measurement traditions that began in the 19th century, centered in the United Kingdom, have given way to applied methods of struggle in the first quarter of the 21st century. The multi-layered nature of poverty (economic, psychological, and sociological) necessitates equally diverse solutions. Therefore, tourism plays a key role in eradicating poverty, both as an economic value chain and as an agent of social transformation (Çuhadar, 2024a). People living in rural areas, in particular, face more difficult conditions in the fight against poverty. Rural poverty directly threatens individuals' physical capacity through concrete deprivations such as malnutrition, inadequate housing conditions, and low health standards. This situation minimizes the productivity of the rural workforce, leading to a permanent erosion in quality of life. Although poverty persists in urban areas, the depth and prevalence of deprivation are much more dramatic in rural areas (Jaganathan, 1988).

The tourism industry exhibits an inclusive character in terms of integrating heterogeneous demographic groups into the workforce. Particularly in the rural tourism ecosystem, women are moving beyond traditional role distributions, evolving from the status of 'invisible domestic labor' to that of 'professional human resources' who provide direct added value to the household and the region (Köse, 2014). This transformation process aims to turn women into strategic actors who are specialized in the production of tourist goods and services and have gained expertise in promotion and presentation.

A large portion of tourism activities in rural areas are managed and administered by women, creating a social dynamic that is appreciated at the sectoral level (Bayram, 2018). This women-centered employment model plays a key role in diversifying the rural economy. In particular, the commercialization of agricultural production through tourism provides women with direct economic income while accelerating development by transforming the region's production potential into a tourist attraction. This study is important in this context, as it aims to highlight the significant role that women, who are often marginalized in rural areas, play in reducing rural poverty in the context of rural tourism.

1. Poverty

Although the phenomenon of poverty has taken different forms throughout history in different social formations, it continues to exist as a chronic socio-

economic problem and a fundamental parameter threatening social stability (Çuhadar, 2024b). Conceptually, poverty symbolizes the deprivation of the opportunities and resources essential for an individual to sustain their socio-biological existence. Since the scope of vital needs varies depending on the socio-cultural fabric, environmental factors, and macroeconomic conditions, the phenomenon of poverty, by its very nature, necessitates a constant comparison between empirical data and normative standards (Aktan & Vural, 2002). In this context, poverty is defined, in the simplest terms, as the inability to reach the minimum level of well-being accepted by society (Eştürk & Kılıç, 2016).

The phenomenon of poverty is a state of deprivation based on the failure to meet basic needs, which is attempted to be defined through multidisciplinary approaches. In this context, poverty is not limited to basic physiological needs, which are individual consumption items; it also considers access to collective services that are critical for the sustainability of social welfare, such as education, health, and public infrastructure (Kümbetoğlu, 2007). Poverty is defined as “generally high unemployment, low income levels, insufficient basic livelihood resources, and high levels of crime and disease” (Bowden, 2005: 380).

The phenomenon of poverty is too complex to be reduced to mere low income and limited material resources; it is a multidimensional problem fueled by social exclusion, lack of political representation, and asymmetries in distribution mechanisms (Öztürk & Çetin, 2009). These socio-economic inequalities vary according to the cultural fabric but have a heterogeneous impact on social strata. When examined on a global scale, it is observed that the disadvantages created by poverty are particularly concentrated along the axes of gender and age, causing deeper damage to women and children (Eştürk & Kılıç, 2016).

2. Rural Poverty

Statistically defined poverty thresholds do not fully cover the real purchasing power and living costs of households in rural areas. Individuals living in rural areas whose main source of livelihood is agriculture are often forced to sustain their lives with an income level that falls below even official data (İlter, 2021). Therefore, rural poverty should be assessed as a qualitative deprivation process in terms of access to socio-economic opportunities, beyond quantitative values (income level).

Individuals face very limited alternatives when it comes to escaping the cycle of poverty in rural areas. The irregularity and inadequacy of the income structure leads to the inability to meet the most basic human needs such as

shelter, nutrition, health, and education (Kartal and Demirhan, 2014: 142). This deprivation is not limited to physical needs; it also entails a life practice that is excluded and isolated from technological opportunities, public services, and socio-cultural activities.

Rural poverty is a systemic problem that not only affects rural areas through factors such as unemployment and limited economic growth, but also causes deep wounds in the urban fabric. This state of deprivation, which begins in rural areas, evolves into the disintegration of the family structure, the cultural exclusion of younger generations, and ultimately chronic social crises in urban areas (Burchina & Siff, 1964: 399). This situation proves that the relationship between rural and urban spaces is dynamic but structurally flawed.

One of the global community's top priorities, the fight against poverty, is shaped around establishing sustainable development, structurally eliminating rural-urban development disparities, and ensuring the equitable distribution of prosperity (Çay & Aksöz, 2021). As stated by Liu et al. (2017), the elimination of poverty and the construction of shared prosperity should be among the strategic goals pursued by humanity in line with its universal development ideals.

3. Rural Tourism

In order to analyze the theoretical basis of the rural tourism phenomenon, it is essential to clarify the concept of 'rural area', which is the main spatial plane of the activity (Ongun et al., 2016). From a tourism perspective, rural areas represent areas located far from urban centers and mass tourism (sea-sand-sun), with low demographic density and where the uniqueness of local cultural heritage (customs, traditions, and norms) is preserved (Çeken et al., 2007). Rural settlements carry high recreational value for the tourism sector thanks to their unspoiled landscape values and preserved biological diversity (Ongun et al., 2017). According to the framework developed by the European Commission (1999), rural tourism is the socio-economic activities in small settlements dominated by low-capacity and locally-scale businesses that serve visitors seeking recreational experiences integrated with local and agricultural identity. This definition builds the sustainability of the activity on small-scale entrepreneurship and the provision of authentic values.

A review of the relevant literature reveals that rural tourism terminology is not homogeneous and is often replaced by specific sub-disciplines such as highland, agricultural, mountain, eco, farm, and village tourism. This conceptual diversity is fundamentally rooted in the academic community's failure to reach a common ground on the theoretical framework and definition

of rural tourism (Esengün et al., 2002; Uçar et al., 2010; Çuhadar, 2019). Another dimension of conceptual uncertainty stems from the multifunctional nature of rural spaces. As Soykan (1999) points out, rural areas are not dominated by a single type of tourism; on the contrary, these areas are inherently heterogeneous, forming an intersection of different types of tourism.

The phenomenon of rural tourism is defined within the framework of the following fundamental dynamics based on its structural characteristics (Boyacıoğlu, 2014):

- It is based on the natural environment, human elements, and ecological balances.
- The development of tourist activities represents a collective process carried out in coordination with the local community.
- The preservation of regional identity, local traditions, and unique cultural fabric constitutes the fundamental supply source of the product.
- The preservation of agricultural diversity and animal production, which are synonymous with the rural fabric, is an integral part of this type of tourism.
- It is a multidimensional structure that aims not only for economic benefit but also for social welfare, environmental protection, and cultural sustainability.
- It creates new job opportunities in the region, promoting the evaluation of local labor potential and economic independence.
- Ecologically sustainable and nature-friendly planning strategies are critical to minimize any negative externalities that may arise from these activities.

Rural tourism activities trigger local development dynamics, creating alternative employment opportunities and value-added income sources for the rural population (Ongun & Çuhadar, 2025). The literature emphasizes that this type of tourism has an improving effect on gender roles, particularly by encouraging women's participation in the workforce, and strengthens women's socio-economic status (Çeken et al., 2007). In addition, rural tourism has the potential to minimize the demographic decline (migration) observed in disadvantaged regions (Çılgin & Ongun, 2025). It is an important source of motivation for the local community to internalize and protect their cultural heritage and to pass these values on to future generations in a sustainable manner. The process revitalizes the entrepreneurial ecosystem among local stakeholders and strengthens the sense of social solidarity (Sharpley & Roberts,

2004). Ultimately, rural tourism is a strategic sector that, on the one hand, offers tourists the opportunity to experience authentic lifestyles and cultural practices, and on the other hand, supports the socio-cultural and economic development of the region by preserving the intrinsic values of the local people through a holistic approach (Çuhadar & Coşkun, 2022). However, it should not be forgotten that rural tourism can only function as a socio-economic development tool if it is rationally integrated with local economic dynamics (Boyacıoğlu, 2014: 84). Rural tourism activities designed with strategic planning minimize seasonality, one of the sector's most fundamental problems, allowing the tourist supply to be spread throughout the year and thus achieving a more stable foundation for sustainability (Çuhadar, 2024b).

4. Being a Woman in Rural Areas

Rural areas represent socio-spatial units where the economic cycle is largely based on agricultural production and livestock activities, where social interaction is shaped within the framework of primary relationships, and where the level of division of labor and specialization is lower than in urban areas (Aydemir, 2013). Social organization in these regions is stabilized around traditional ties and collective living practices. When analyzing production processes in rural areas, the significant role women in less developed countries play in both agricultural and non-agricultural activities is noteworthy. Within the labor-based resource creation process, women perform a vital function in the functioning of the rural economic system and occupy a central place in the reproduction of social welfare (Yavuz et al., 2018). Nevertheless, as emphasized by Koutsou et al. (2009), women's roles in the economic expansion dynamics of rural areas have long been addressed within the paradigm of 'invisibility'. This approach reveals that women's performance in both household production and agricultural activities has not found the representation it deserves in macro-level development indicators.

The position of women in rural areas is characterized by intense labor exploitation, not limited to economic production but centered on social and biological reproduction processes (procreation, household care, etc.) (Kızılaslan & Yamanoğlu, 2010). In these regions, where traditional normative structures are dominant, the strategic tasks undertaken by women are coded as non-market and unpaid activities and are therefore not evaluated in the 'employment' category; as a result, women's vitally important labor is trivialized and devalued in social perception (Lordoğlu, 1990; Candan & Özalp Günal, 2015).

The low income levels of households engaged in agricultural activities limit women's access to non-agricultural employment opportunities. In this context, women are predominantly integrated into the labor market as 'unpaid family workers' or 'seasonal workers' (Özdemir et al., 2023). As Güresinli (2015) points out, this segment, which lacks social security, faces structural barriers in economic and social participation processes. In addition, the concentration of reproductive responsibilities such as domestic services, gardening, and childcare on women leads to serious time poverty, causing the rapid depletion of physical and human capital (Cihangir et al., 2020).

The rural social structure, through its traditional norms and cultural codes, traps women in a multidimensional spiral of pressure and restriction both within the household and in institutional mechanisms (Keskin, 2014). As Arıkan (1988) emphasizes, positioning women as 'unpaid domestic workers' hinders their individualization processes and economic-social autonomy. In this structure, women's respectability is indexed to carrying out domestic and agricultural activities without expecting material compensation, as well as continuing their lineage. However, despite this intense labor, women's social status remains marginal, and their labor does not receive the value it deserves. Within the cultural elements established by the patriarchal structure in rural areas, women's role is relegated to the background at home. Thus, the social, economic, and cultural backwardness of rural women is inevitable.

5. The Role of Women in Rural Tourism

In the tourism industry, women occupy a strategic position both as a labor supply and a demand focus. Women's role in rural tourism, in particular, is central by nature. Women's dominance in the preservation of traditional knowledge, the transmission of local cultural codes, and unique production processes such as handicrafts transforms this type of tourism into a 'home-based entrepreneurship' model. Therefore, women function not only as the executors of a tourist activity but also as the fundamental catalysts that revitalize the local economy (Fidan & Nam, 2012). Rural tourism is considered one of the niche areas where women's entrepreneurship and labor force yield the most effective results; women are even described as brand ambassadors and key actors in this type of tourism (Ballesteros et al., 2014). This situation reflects the central position of women in rural development processes.

Unlike other types of tourism, rural tourism allows women to directly convert their domestic production skills (guesthouse management, gastronomy, handicrafts, etc.) into economic value. Women, who take on operational responsibilities ranging from kitchen services to accommodation management,

play a key role in the sustainability of rural tourism. In this context, the commercialization of traditional products such as tarhana, molasses, and handicrafts constitutes a strategic step in rural women's economic empowerment (Boyacıoğlu, 2014). Local family businesses, which align with the unique reality of rural areas, offer a critical window of opportunity for women to transition from invisible labor to professional status. Women's central role in rural tourism is not only a process of generating economic income but also a process of being recognized as an 'actor' in the public sphere (Kaya, 2017). In this context, family businesses constitute the most suitable structural units for the sustainability of women's entrepreneurship.

Women's participation in the labor market through rural tourism activities acts as a catalyst for the transformation of social perception patterns. Women who play an active role in economic production not only contribute to the household budget but also pave the way for a reduction in traditional gender-based role distributions and the social pressures associated with them. This increases women's visibility in the public and private spheres, enabling increased self-confidence and a redefinition of their social status (Khatiwada & Silva, 2015).

Rural tourism contributes to the sustainability of rural development by promoting female employment in particular in the local labor market and creating economic vitality. This model serves as a critical lever in alleviating the pressure of migration from rural to urban areas, as well as in addressing regional inequalities in income distribution and establishing social justice (Torun, 2013). Spreading tourism supply throughout the year by diversifying activities is a macroeconomic balancing factor that minimizes development disparities between regions.

Conclusion

Poverty is conceptualized in the literature as a systemic state of deprivation that prevents individuals from realizing their basic human capabilities, beyond mere income insufficiency. In this context, poverty represents a multidimensional deprivation that encompasses not only primary physiological needs such as nutrition and shelter, but also access to human capital investments such as education, health services, and public infrastructure. Poverty is more prevalent in rural areas. Life in rural areas is more difficult, and scarce resources must be used efficiently. The situation of women in rural areas is also affected by this phenomenon, making it even more difficult for them to sustain their lives. The tourism sector, described as a smokeless industry, is one of the most favorable platforms for female employment. Women, who have been

overshadowed by structural barriers such as customs and traditions, have come to the fore in recent years with the development of rural tourism in their regions. Thus, the role of women in rural areas changes, and they achieve more humane conditions.

The employment opportunities created by rural tourism enable women to play an active role in economic processes, thereby restructuring their status within the household and society. This process paves the way for the relaxation of traditional gender roles and for women to gain more authority in decision-making mechanisms. Women providing significant financial resources to the household has a seriously positive impact on their purchasing power when rural opportunities are considered. In rural areas, women are empowered in both family life and in terms of the sector, paving the way for them to fulfill themselves in areas where they are lacking. In other words, they find opportunities to develop themselves in terms of health, education, and social life. Accordingly, the value of women who have been pushed into the background in rural areas will be understood to some extent. In addition, rural tourism contributes to the entrepreneurial spirit of young people and women in the region. In short, rural tourism is an effective factor in alleviating rural poverty. Thanks to rural tourism, the role of women in the household changes, and they gain all the opportunities they have been deprived of in life.

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