

Research Paper: Enhancing Women's Participation in Sustainable Rural Tourism: A Theoretical Development Approach Using the Critical Communicative Methodology

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The study aims to develop a theoretical framework for enhancing rural women's participation in sustainable rural tourism, addressing the current lack of research that incorporates women's perspectives. While previous studies acknowledge women's vital contributions, they often overlook community voices and context-specific solutions.

Method: This research employed Critical Communicative Methodology (CCM), engaging participants in five communicative focus group sessions across 14 rural tourist villages. The groups included local women active in tourism, tourism experts, and academic researchers. Data was collected through open-ended discussions, distinguishing between exclusionary dimensions (factors that reproduce inequalities) and transformative dimensions (factors that enable change). Thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns, barriers, and strategies for participation.

Results: Results indicated that establishing a thriving local tourism market is key to women's empowerment. Strategies were identified at three levels: (1) Macro level—policy reforms, accessible loans, and institutional platforms for women's networking and education; (2) Meso level—integration of educated rural women as mediators between local producers and national/global markets; (3) Micro level—locally tailored training that aligns with cultural norms and builds self-confidence. Communication gaps between educated and non-educated women, the role of empathy, and the importance of bottom-up initiatives were also highlighted.

Conclusion: The proposed CCM-based framework demonstrates how communication-led, multi-level strategies can dismantle structural barriers, foster economic empowerment, and promote inclusive rural tourism development. This theoretical contribution extends existing participatory development literature and offers practical guidance for policymakers and practitioners seeking culturally sensitive and sustainable interventions.

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1. Introduction

A nation's socio-economic fabric intertwines with its rural areas' development trajectory, with a pronounced emphasis on unlocking the latent potential embedded in rural tourism (Li et al., 2022). Within this landscape, the literature underscores women's pivotal and multifaceted role in tourism, especially in rural settings (Pastore et al., 2021). However, despite the acknowledged significance of women in fostering tourism, the equitable distribution of benefits remains elusive across all rural communities. This imbalance perpetuates gender disparities, contributing to a gradual pace of transformative change within rural tourism (Chambers & Rakić, 2018). The indispensable contributions of women are often impeded by horizontal and vertical inequalities, creating barriers that hinder the realization of their full potential (Waluyo, 2011; UNWTO ANNUAL REPORT, 2020; Rinaldi & Salerno, 2020; Tristani et al., 2022).

While extant research has probed factors influencing women's involvement in rural tourism, the current study aims to illuminate a critical gap in the literature by affording prominence to the voices of the local community. Despite recognizing women's indispensable role, existing studies have tended to overlook the perspectives of the local community, necessitating a departure from conventional methodologies. This study adopts the Critical Communicative Methodology (CCM), originally developed by Flecha and colleagues, as a dialogical research approach grounded in Habermas's theory of communicative action and the principle of egalitarian dialogue between researchers and participants (Flecha, 2000; Gómez, Puigvert, & Flecha, 2011). Unlike traditional methodologies that position participants as passive subjects, CCM actively involves them in co-constructing knowledge, ensuring that both scientific expertise and lived experiences contribute equally to the research process. It distinguishes between exclusionary dimensions—factors reproducing social inequalities—and transformative dimensions—factors enabling positive change—thus generating knowledge that is both academically rigorous and socially impactful (Puigvert, Christou, & Holford, 2012; Sanati, 2019).

CCM has been successfully applied in various contexts, including education, gender studies, and rural development, to foster social transformation. One notable example is the European Union's INCLUD-ED project, which translated research findings into actionable policy recommendations adopted by the European Parliament

(Flecha, 2014; Tellado & Sava, 2010). These distinctive attributes position CCM as a socially conscious and comprehensive approach to studying and addressing barriers to women's participation in rural tourism.

In leveraging the nuanced capabilities of CCM, the current study seeks to amplify the participation of local women, delving into their arguments and dialogues concerning strategies for meaningful female participation in rural tourism. The research is propelled by a fundamental question: How do women significantly enhance their participation in rural tourism? By exploring the intersectionality of gender dynamics, community perspectives, and communicative methodologies, this study contributes substantively to the ongoing discourse surrounding women's roles in rural tourism, advocating for inclusive and transformative practices that resonate at local and global levels.

2. Literature Review

In our pursuit to engage rural women actively in the research process and draw upon global experiences, we commenced by conducting an extensive analysis and summary of global lessons learned and best practices. Subsequently, these experiences were presented to participants, allowing us to discern which practices were most compatible with the conditions of the local community. The global lessons learned were categorized into three sets:

Structural Barriers: Previous research has consistently highlighted the importance of this issue (Fathizadeh et al., 2022; Mooney, 2020). Patriarchy is a significant factor impeding women's participation in rural tourism. Projects designed to challenge patriarchal structures include the Feminist Agrifood Systems Theory (FAST) in the US, which redefines women farmers' roles in sustainable farming systems (Dentzman et al., 2023; Wright & Annes, 2020). Another notable initiative is the Creemore 100 Mile Store in Canada, where local women-led businesses resist neoliberal and patriarchal business models. These projects, grounded in critical thinking principles, question traditional norms, support women's empowerment, and reshape perceptions within the community (Mair & Sumner, 2019). The Positive Deviance (PD) approach in India presents a compelling example of rural women entrepreneurs in a male-dominated sector employing unconventional but successful strategies (Jain et al., 2019).

This approach emphasizes deep communication, personal branding, and resilience, challenging societal

norms and fostering economic empowerment. On a broader scale, global initiatives like MenEngage Alliance and CARE's Gender Equality Framework underscore the collective efforts to engage men and boys in achieving gender equality. These initiatives work towards advancing gender justice, human rights, and social justice, contributing to a world where healthy, fulfilling, and equitable relationships are the norm (Alliance, 2016).

Economic Barriers: Projects such as Women's Agrotourism Cooperatives in Greece and the Grameen Bank model in Bangladesh exemplify innovative solutions to economic barriers (Bernasek, 2003). These initiatives empower rural women economically, providing leadership skills, financial independence, and control over their ventures. Iran's Carbon Sequestration Project (CSP) showcases a community-based natural resources development approach to enhance socioeconomic conditions.

Barriers to Empowerment: Projects targeting skill and empowerment barriers, like the 'One Village One Product' program in Japan (Stock & Zuccolo, 2019), the TREE program supporting rural economic empowerment (Lachaud et al., 2018), and initiatives like Dimitra Club (Adisa, 2020) and the 'Barefoot Model' in Sub-Saharan Africa, focus on skills development, self-reliance, and transformative change (Mininni, 2017). These programs contribute to rural women's self-esteem, leadership, and economic independence.

Despite the progress highlighted in existing research, there are avenues for new exploration and innovation. The emerging field of communicative methodology provides an opportunity to delve deeper into the dynamics of women's participation in rural tourism. A critical analysis of the intersectionality of barriers faced by rural women, coupled with an inclusive framework, could pave the way for more effective and targeted interventions. The current study significantly contributes to the existing body of research by adopting a communicative approach, building on global lessons learned, and tailoring strategies to the unique challenges faced by the local community. The innovative aspect lies in the emphasis on the voices of rural women themselves, bridging the gap between global practices and local realities. This approach distinguishes our work from previous studies, ensuring a more nuanced understanding of the barriers and strategies for women's participation in rural tourism.

While the existing literature provides valuable insights, there is a pressing need for a more profound critical analysis. Future research should explore the intricate interplay of structural, economic, and empowerment barriers, acknowledging these challenges' nuanced and context-specific nature. Examining the long-term impacts of various interventions and their sustainability could further enrich our understanding.

In conclusion, our research seeks to elevate the discourse on women's participation in rural tourism by identifying barriers and solutions and amplifying the voices of rural women through a communicative methodology. This approach contributes to a more holistic and socially conscious understanding, ensuring that interventions are tailored to the community's needs.

3. Methodology

This study employs the Critical Communicative Methodology (CCM), an approach pioneered by Flecha and colleagues as part of a broader effort to democratize knowledge production and connect academic research with tangible social transformation (Flecha, 2000; Gómez, Puigvert, & Flecha, 2011). Rooted in Habermas's theory of communicative action and the principle of egalitarian dialogue, CCM posits that knowledge is constructed through interaction and mutual recognition of expertise between researchers and participants. Unlike traditional methodologies, CCM treats participants not as passive subjects but as co-creators of knowledge, integrating both scientific evidence and lived experience into the research process.

A central feature of CCM is its analytical distinction between exclusionary dimension elements that reproduce social inequalities and transformative dimensions — elements that enable individuals and communities to overcome these inequalities (Puigvert, Christou, & Holford, 2012; Sanati, 2019). This dual lens ensures that the methodology not only identifies barriers but also generates actionable strategies for change. The transformative potential of CCM has been demonstrated in diverse contexts, such as the European Union's INCLUD-ED project, where research findings were translated into policy recommendations adopted by the European Parliament (Flecha, 2014; Tellado & Sava, 2010).

In this study, the organizational structure follows CCM principles and assumes a triangular form:

1. The Advisory Committee – Comprising scholars, practitioners, and experts in tourism and rural devel-

opment, this body guided research design, theoretical frameworks, ethical considerations, and overall strategy, ensuring alignment with CCM principles.

2. The Panel of Experts – Specialists from fields such as communication studies, sociology, and gender empowerment reviewed and validated research instruments, offering critical insights into potential challenges and cultural nuances in communicative interactions.

3. Free Task-Oriented Groups – Composed of community representatives relevant to the research objectives, these groups engaged in open, participant-driven discussions exploring power dynamics, communication patterns, and shared meanings. Their insights informed us of the design of subsequent Communicative Focus Groups.

Participants for the focus groups were purposefully selected from the Free Task-Oriented Groups to represent diverse perspectives:

- Local Women Active in Rural Tourism (e.g., village heads, ecolodge operators, handicraft producers);
- Experts with Lived Experience in tourism entrepreneurship and women’s empowerment.
- Academic Researchers and Practitioners in tourism and rural development

Table 1 summarizes the participant profiles, including rural governors, successful entrepreneurs, women leaders, and multidisciplinary researchers.

encouraging diverse viewpoints, and guiding discussions without imposing preconceived notions. Sessions followed the communicative focus group model,

which—grounded in critical theory—emphasizes inclusivity, dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving. Open-ended prompts encouraged participants to share personal experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of communication within their communities.

In total, five communicative focus group sessions were held across 14 rural tourist villages. Discussions were structured to:

1. Present and discuss global best practices in women’s participation in tourism.
2. Examine local barriers and enabling factors.
3. Co-create culturally sensitive strategies to enhance women’s participation.

Data from the sessions were analyzed thematically through the CCM lens, identifying exclusionary and transformative dimensions across structural, economic, and socio-cultural domains. This process ensured that the resulting theoretical framework was co-developed with the very women whose realities it seeks to address, thereby maintaining both academic rigor and community relevance.

Data collected from the Communicative Focus Groups is subjected to thematic analysis. Researchers identify recurring themes, patterns, and power dynamics within the discourse. This analysis is grounded in critical communicative principles, aiming to uncover underlying structures contributing to societal inequalities. The insights gathered from the Communicative Focus Groups contribute to a deeper understanding of communication dynamics within the community. Thematic analysis is guided by critical communicative principles, focusing on unveiling power structures and social inequalities.

Table 1. Profile of Communicative Focus Group

Multi-cultural Research Team	participants	Background	Age
Local women active in rural tourism	Esmat	Dehyar (Rural governor)	30
	Atiyeh	Director of Eco-Lode	45
	Najmeh	Rural women and top entrepreneurs in rug weaving	32
Experts with lived experience	Katayoon	Expert in the field of women’s empowerment	57
	Nasreen	Handy-craft Entrepreneur	50
	Maryam	Manager of tourism training enterprise	37
Research Team	Farhad	Scholar in rural planning	49
	Nader	Scholar in Sociology	45
	Farah	Researcher in the field of rural tourism	49

Source: Research Findings



The research journey involved five heartfelt gatherings where a diverse group of people aged 30 to 49 came together to share stories, thoughts, and dreams, and discuss women's challenges in rural tourism. In the first meeting, everyone got to know each other and understood the purpose of the research. Open discussions unfolded in the second meeting as participants discussed their experiences and concerns. In the third meeting, the focus turned global, exploring successful practices worldwide. Meeting four was about brainstorming solutions, with participants breaking into small groups to refine these learnings locally, emphasizing the need for context-sensitive solutions. The group delved into real-life examples and case studies as the dialogue deepened, weaving in their unique cultural fabric. These discussions were not just about problems but about finding practical, community-specific solutions. The journey concluded with a reflective meeting, where lingering questions were addressed, and a shared understanding emerged. The findings emphasized the transformative power of open dialogue, proving that when the local community (women) shares their ideas, it catalyzes overcoming barriers in rural tourism.

Finally, in the fifth meeting, researchers share initial findings, inviting reflections and thoughts on the research's impact. Throughout this journey, flexibility was essential, and the focus was on empowering participants. Their stories and insights were carefully documented, ensuring that each person's voice was heard and valued. This research was not just about data but a collective effort to understand, connect, and work together toward positive change in the community.

Data for this study were collected through five communicative focus group sessions held in 14 rural tourist villages in Khorasan Razavi, Iran. Guided by the principles of the Critical Communicative Methodology (CCM), the sessions brought together a diverse range of participants aged 30 to 49, including local women active in rural tourism, experts with lived experience, and academic researchers. From the outset, the process aimed to create a space for open and egalitarian dialogue, where participants could share their stories, ideas, and concerns without hierarchical constraints. In the first meeting, participants became acquainted with one another and gained a shared understanding of the purpose of the research. The second meeting moved into open discussions of personal experiences and challenges faced by women in rural tourism. In the third meeting, attention turned to global best practices, enabling participants to explore strategies used elsewhere and to reflect on their potential local applicability. The fourth meeting focused

on brainstorming locally relevant solutions, with small group discussions aimed at refining global lessons into culturally sensitive, community-based strategies. Finally, the fifth meeting was dedicated to presenting initial findings, inviting feedback, and reflecting on the potential impact of the research.

Throughout these gatherings, flexibility was essential, and the process remained firmly participant-driven. Moderators facilitated discussions without imposing predetermined conclusions, ensuring equitable participation and encouraging a diversity of perspectives. Every insight and narrative was documented to capture the richness of participants' lived realities. This was not merely a process of data extraction but a collective effort to build mutual understanding and generate practical, context-specific solutions.

The analysis of these discussions followed the communicative data analysis framework outlined by Gómez et al. (2006), focusing on two interconnected dimensions: the exclusionary dimension, which identifies structural, cultural, and economic factors that reproduce inequality; and the transformative dimension, which uncovers elements capable of overcoming these barriers. Villages were selected based on three criteria: low socioeconomic conditions, cultural diversity, and relatively strong tourism performance compared to similar settlements. Data interpretation began with the research team synthesizing key insights from the dialogues, which were then reviewed by a multicultural team to incorporate multiple perspectives before being finalized.

A systematic coding scheme was applied to organize the qualitative data into thematic categories, each representing a significant pattern or idea emerging from the discussions. These included: the feasibility of implementing global solutions locally; historical barriers contributing to a sense of powerlessness; the role of economic empowerment in influencing household dynamics and challenging patriarchal norms; strategies for developing authentic local markets; aligning traditional products with consumer needs while preserving cultural uniqueness; the role of educated rural women as intermediaries between local producers and broader markets; communication gaps between educated and non-educated women and the need for empathy-driven, bottom-up educational approaches; the challenges of balancing local and non-local investment; and the necessity of government support and enabling policies. From these themes, actionable strategies were distilled into three levels—macro, meso, and micro—each addressing

a different layer of policy, market integration, and community education.

The coding categories were developed collaboratively with the advisory committee, which reviewed relevant best practices and previous experiences to ensure accuracy and comprehensiveness. This process reflected the core CCM commitment to integrating participants' lived experiences with academic knowledge. Rather than offering only generic recommendations, the analysis led to a holistic three-step approach: first, identifying global and national best practices; second, adapting these to the specific cultural and economic contexts of the studied villages; and third, synthesizing them into a communicative model for dismantling barriers to women's participation in rural tourism. This method ensured that the final framework was not an externally imposed construct but an authentic, co-created strategy grounded in the voices and aspirations of rural women themselves.

4. Findings

The findings of this study emerge from an in-depth exploration of five communicative focus group meetings, which, guided by the principles of the Critical Communicative Methodology (CCM), created an environment where open and equitable dialogue could dismantle barriers to women's active participation in rural tourism. These discussions integrated global lessons with local realities, allowing participants to examine the applicability of international practices within their own socio-cultural context. In the early stages, the multicultural research team and participants critically reviewed examples from other regions. For instance, the proposal to organize festivals in rural communities was initially seen as a potential catalyst for short-term engagement but was ultimately judged as financially burdensome and possibly counterproductive to women's self-confidence. This concern reflected earlier research findings where low self-confidence had been identified as a key barrier to women's involvement in rural tourism. As the dialogues evolved, attention shifted to the enduring problem of "historical barriers" and the community's collective memory of unfulfilled initiatives, which had fostered a sense of powerlessness. The consensus emerged that any proposed intervention must deliver tangible, positive results to rebuild trust and encourage sustained engagement.

Economic empowerment became a central theme, with participants stressing that benefits must extend to the household level to secure broader community support. Personal testimonies, such as Esmat's experience of how

her financial success helped alter men's perceptions and challenge patriarchal norms, illustrated the transformative potential of women's entrepreneurship. This focus led the group to prioritize the creation of authentic local markets as a means of embedding economic gains within the community. However, aligning traditional handicrafts with consumer preferences while preserving cultural authenticity emerged as a significant challenge, prompting discussions on how educated rural women could act as cultural and commercial intermediaries. Atiyeh's insights revealed a communication gap between educated women and their less formally educated peers, underlining the need for empathy and a bottom-up approach to education in order to bridge social divides and enhance cooperation.

Subsequent meetings addressed the structural and economic preconditions for market success, including the complex trade-off between attracting non-local investors and safeguarding local cultural identity. While external investment was recognized as important for scaling up production and accessing broader markets, participants agreed it must be balanced with mechanisms that protect the authenticity and quality of local products. The role of educated rural women and proactive government policies was repeatedly emphasized as critical for building investor confidence and sustaining development initiatives.

From these dialogues, the study distilled strategies at three interconnected levels. At the macro level, policy reforms, financial support mechanisms, and institutionalized platforms for women's networking and education were deemed essential. At the meso level, integrating educated rural women into market structures as intermediaries was identified to connect local producers to national and global markets. At the micro level, participants advocated culturally sensitive training programs that could strengthen women's self-confidence and business capabilities.

When placed in the context of existing literature, these findings align with [Gao and Wu's \(2017\)](#) three-tiered rural revitalization model and [Ghadery and Henderson's \(2012\)](#) work on sustainable rural tourism in Iran, which both highlight the necessity of bottom-up, community-led strategies. The emphasis on active government facilitation mirrors [Ahuja and Cooper's \(2007\)](#) conclusions on rural tourism in India and echoes [Nurtanio and Brahmantyo's \(2021\)](#) call for stronger public-sector involvement in marketing and promotion. The study's focus on external investment as a driver of market growth resonates with [Kantarci's \(2007\)](#) and [Hummelbrunner](#)

and Miglbauer's (1994) observations, though it diverges from Boukas's (2019) cautionary stance that prioritizing local investment reduces dependency on outside capital. Similarly, the prioritization of education and training reflects Botha et al. (2006), Simpson et al. (2002), and Kaur (2017), all of whom underline the link between women's education, income generation, and empowerment.

What distinguishes this study is its integration of communicative dialogues into economic strategy formation, positioning CCM not only as a research tool but as a mechanism for fostering economic empowerment. Unlike traditional approaches that offer generalized prescriptions, this research generates a locally grounded, culturally specific market model designed by and for rural Iranian women. The inclusion of multicultural perspectives enriched the analysis, ensuring the strategies address the diverse realities of participants and increasing their applicability to similar contexts elsewhere. The contribution is both theoretically demonstrating how communicative methodologies can intersect with economic development models and practical offering a roadmap for policymakers and practitioners that includes concrete actions at the macro, meso, and micro levels.

While the study presents a strong case for the transformative potential of CCM in rural tourism, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The reliance on communicative methodologies may introduce subjective biases, and the regional focus may limit the generalizability of findings. Future research could extend this framework to other cultural and economic settings, conduct comparative analyses, assess the sustainability of proposed models over time, and explore the role of digital technologies in enhancing rural women's participation in tourism markets. By doing so, the dynamic relationship between communication, agency, and structural change can be better understood, ensuring that rural tourism becomes a more inclusive and equitable driver of sustainable development.

5. Discussion

This research set out not merely to apply an existing approach, but to develop a theoretical framework that expands the Critical Communicative Methodology (CCM) into the context of sustainable rural tourism, with a focus on women's participation. While grounded in empirical findings from 14 rural tourist villages in Iran, the contribution is primarily theoretical—proposing a conceptual model that integrates communicative processes with macro-, meso-, and micro-level strategies

for dismantling structural barriers to women's engagement in rural tourism.

By explicitly positioning CCM as a tool for theory-building, this study advances the participatory development literature, showing how egalitarian dialogue can be operationalized to address intertwined economic, cultural, and communicative constraints. In doing so, it moves beyond descriptive accounts of barriers to offer a structured and adaptable model that can be applied in diverse rural contexts.

When compared with prior studies, the framework aligns with Gao and Wu's (2017) three-tier revitalization model and Ghaderi and Henderson's (2012) sustainable tourism analysis in Iran, but diverges by embedding dialogue-based processes into strategy formation. It reinforces Botha et al.'s (2006) and Kaur's (2017) emphasis on education for empowerment, while adding the mediating roles of empathy, cultural sensitivity, and bottom-up learning. Furthermore, unlike Boukas (2019), who prioritizes locally driven investment, this study proposes a balanced investment model that combines external funding with mechanisms to safeguard authenticity and community control.

Practical recommendations emerging from the findings include:

1. Policy reforms to simplify regulations, expand microcredit, and institutionalize women's cooperatives and networking platforms.
2. Market integration strategies that utilize the skills of educated rural women as mediators linking local products with broader markets, while preserving cultural heritage.
3. Capacity-building programs that combine technical and entrepreneurial training with self-confidence development, tailored to cultural contexts.
4. Balanced investment approaches that attract capital without compromising community ownership or product authenticity.
5. Participatory monitoring systems to ensure that interventions remain adaptive, equitable, and community-driven.

By combining these elements, the proposed model addresses not only economic empowerment but also transformations in communication and social relations—fac-

tors essential for lasting participation and sustainable rural tourism. Future research should test and refine this model in varied socio-economic and cultural settings, evaluate its long-term impacts, and explore digital tools for expanding rural women's market access.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

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