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Article

Women's Empowerment in Rural Tourism as Key to Sustainable Communities' Transformation

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Abstract: The study focuses on the significance of empowering women, which plays a crucial role in the sustainable transformation of rural communities. It highlights the relevance of rural tourism as both an indicator of women's livelihoods and a catalyst for meaningful change. Increasingly, women are forming associations that not only foster positive interactions among themselves but also extend their influence to other women within their communities. The research aimed to address two key questions: "What actions would you undertake in the realm of rural tourism?" and "What does the advancement of rural tourism mean for you on a personal level?" To analyze the data, factor analysis was employed to categorize the variables alongside structural equation modeling (SEM). The findings identified six distinct factors and demonstrated the interrelationship among these factors. The findings indicate that women willingly choose to participate in rural tourism, predominantly involving activities related to domestic food and beverages, tourism and hospitality, and the production and sale of souvenirs. This addresses the first inquiry. The responses to the second inquiry identified factors such as empowerment, independence, and development. This supports the initial hypothesis H, which posits that rural tourism acts as a measure of women's empowerment, resulting in significant changes within the rural communities in which these women reside. The research outcomes are relevant to all rural regions in Serbia and its vicinity, where women's roles are often marginalized and a transformation is essential.

Keywords: women's empowerment; sustainability; rural tourism; community transformation; Serbia



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1. Introduction

It can be asserted that rural tourism possesses the "power" to convert both natural and cultural resources into attractions for visitors, thereby enhancing the position of destinations within the tourism market and securing a competitive edge [1–3]. In addition to physical alterations to the landscape, rural tourism also leads to the "power" of empowerment, often serving as a catalyst for the attainment of various sustainable objectives [4–7]. When examining rural destinations, the advantages derived from the activation of tourism are distinctly apparent; primarily, these include the revitalization and continued existence of villages [8,9]. Furthermore, the empowerment associated with tourism has a particularly significant impact on women [10]. In these rural areas, women represent a notably vulnerable demographic, as they continue to exist under patriarchal conditions [11].

Rural tourism is dependent on urban residents' desire for tranquility and open spaces, as well as for recreational activities in outdoor activities [12]. This form of tourism encompasses visits to national parks and nature reserves [13]. In addition to the cultural heritage

in rural regions, panoramic drives, and the enjoyment of rural landscapes, there is an emphasis on tourist accommodation in rural households [14]. The essence of rural tourism is to offer visitors personal interactions, a tangible connection to the human environment within these areas, and, as much as possible, the opportunity to engage in the activities, traditions, and lifestyle of the local populace [15]. Alongside accommodation, the services provided encompass events, festivals, recreational activities, and the production and sale of handicrafts and agricultural products [16]. Rural tourism serves as a method for revitalizing areas that have been abandoned. Rural regions can guarantee their future sustainability by either preserving existing jobs or generating new employment opportunities [17,18], while also enhancing occupational diversity [19]. Additionally, rural tourism emphasizes the conservation of natural resources and promotes efforts in rural preservation [20]. When visiting foreign countries, tourists are usually unfamiliar with the customs, culture, and traditional crafts [21]. Tourist attractions centered around crafts serve a significant purpose. The primary objective of rural tourism is to offer a supplementary income to the rural populace, enhance their standard of living, and mitigate the depopulation and decline of rural regions [22,23]. Nevertheless, rural tourism encompasses far more than this. It serves as a “wind at the back”, providing a means of empowerment for women in rural regions and presenting opportunities for their emancipation [24].

According to Gil Arroyo et al. [25], women’s empowerment in rural tourism can be advanced through entrepreneurial ventures, with rural tourism entrepreneurship frequently being undertaken by women who refer to themselves as “rural tourism product producers”, “rural tourism product providers”, or “rural tourism front office personnel”. The research commenced with the main hypothesis H₁, which proposes that rural tourism serves as an indicator of women’s empowerment, leading to substantial transformations within the rural communities inhabited by these women. In this sense, rural tourism is regarded as a catalyst for change. These transformations not only impact the lives of the women involved but also extend to the lives of their families and loved ones. Various studies indicate that one of the primary motivations for women’s autonomy is their responsibilities caring for others, which predominantly their family and children [26].

According to Azamat et al. [27], in contemporary society, women possess an unprecedented awareness that empowers them to “take matters into their own hands”. This proactive stance not only impacts their own lives but also shapes the experiences of their daughters, fostering generations that are better positioned to attain a more equitable status within a predominantly “masculine” environment. Recent monitoring data indicate that the income disparity between rural women and men can be attributed in part to the fact that over 80% of the female labor force residing in rural areas is engaged in the primary sector. Additionally, the proportion of women employed in the secondary and tertiary sectors is 22.2 percentage points lower than that of their male counterparts [28–31]. The literature further reveals [32] that rural women often lack adequate decision-making authority within the household and are significantly less vocal than men regarding family business matters and resource allocation.

Women’s empowerment has emerged as a critical factor in the development of rural tourism, especially in regions like Serbia where traditional gender roles have historically constrained female participation in economic activities. The intersection of women’s empowerment and sustainable tourism practices presents an opportunity for transformative change within rural communities, leading to enhanced economic vitality and social cohesion. As Serbia grapples with the dual challenges of rural development and gender equality, the promotion of women in tourism not only facilitates their independence but also fosters sustainable practices that benefit the entire community. This research will explore the pivotal role of women’s empowerment in rural tourism, delve into sustainability practices within this sector, and analyze the broader transformation of communities as a result of these initiatives.

The role of women's empowerment in rural tourism in Serbia can be traced back to a historical context where women were relegated to domestic roles and often excluded from economic activities outside the home. However, recent decades have witnessed a significant shift, with increasing numbers of women participating in tourism-related endeavors. This transformation is driven by several factors, including educational advancements, access to micro-financing, and supportive networks that encourage female entrepreneurship. Current trends indicate that women are not only becoming key players in the tourism sector but are also leading innovative initiatives that showcase the unique cultural heritage of their communities. For instance, women-led guesthouses and local artisan shops have thrived, providing authentic experiences for tourists and generating income for families. Women banded together to promote agritourism and traditional crafts, attracting both domestic and international visitors. Through such endeavors, women are not only reclaiming their roles in the economy but are also redefining the narrative of rural tourism, positioning themselves as essential contributors to sustainable community development.

In addition to the aforementioned data, there are positive indicators suggesting that the empowerment of women and the education they receive through various women's associations yield beneficial outcomes [33]. By sharing their experiences, showcasing best practices, and providing tangible solutions regarding how to secure financial resources for start-ups, women are able to achieve significant results and enhance their empowerment. This process allows them to visibly influence their surroundings, fostering both personal and social development. The purpose of this research was to address two key questions, determining what challenges women most frequently encounter in the realm of rural tourism, and what the development of rural tourism signifies for them. The collected data were categorized into six factors. The first three factors revealed that women predominantly opt to engage in domestic crafts, which include producing homemade food and drink and creating souvenirs. The remaining three factors elucidated the significance of rural tourism for women, with responses clustered around the themes of empowerment, independence, and development.

2. Literature Review

The contemporary business environment is characterized by constant changes, accelerated development in all areas, and an intensified focus on sustainability. The aforementioned challenges are driving organizations in all industries to grow resiliently and sustainably [34]. The sustainability of tourism is crucial because, as a social and economic phenomenon, tourism is directly exposed to continuous and vigorous changes and challenges globally [35]. Empowerment is classified as one of the 12 objectives for sustainable tourism and is regarded as a crucial prerequisite for the attainment of these objectives. The development of sustainable tourism is intricately linked to the empowerment of women [2,13]. Empowerment theory posits that power is not a finite resource, and that empowerment is facilitated through the connections individuals share with one another. This is especially important in the context of women's empowerment.

2.1. Women's Empowerment

According to Pécot et al. [36] women are happy to join women's associations, where the effects of empowerment are achieved in the best way. This interconnection enhances individual empowerment. On a personal level, individuals can improve their problem-solving abilities by collaborating with others, which can influence the methods employed to address issues and the resolution of problems, as well as being guided by their own sense of empowerment. According to Abdu et al. [37], any empowerment achieved through the collective has long-lasting and individual effects. An individual's sense of self-efficacy, defined as the cultivation of personal strength, power, or mastery, influences their capacity to engage in circumstances where they may not possess authority. The concept of individual self-efficacy is regarded as "individualistic", being rooted in the belief that confidence in one's ability to reach a goal is essential for self-empowerment [38]. This implies that

a profound trust in oneself is sufficient to transform one's life. Nonetheless, it is important to note that a shift in self-efficacy cannot be deemed true empowerment unless it is accompanied by a tangible change in one's life circumstances [39].

Keeping this in mind, scientists believe that women's empowerment occurs at different levels: economic, psychological, social, and political. Each of them is equally important and significantly affects the woman's attitude towards herself and others at large. Economic empowerment, in this context, refers to an enhancement in women's status from an economic standpoint. Various studies indicate that tourism that highlights rural life, art, culture, and heritage in rural areas serves as a significant avenue for socio-economic empowerment. This approach not only provides economic and social benefits to the local community but also enriches the tourism experience, particularly for women [40]. It is widely accepted that tourism has the potential to economically empower individuals and communities by offering a range of employment and business opportunities, thereby contributing to the alleviation of poverty [41].

Poverty remains a prevalent issue that is faced by every household within impoverished communities. Tourism generates employment opportunities within households. It establishes a marketplace at the local level and contributes to enduring economic benefits [22,23,42]. A local community benefits from the distribution of cash that is earned, which is shared among numerous households within the area. Tangible evidence of the advancements stemming from this income can be observed, such as the construction of houses using more durable materials and an increased number of children attending school [43]. The psychological aspect of empowerment emphasizes how the development of tourism can enhance residents' pride and self-esteem or, conversely, diminish it by instilling feelings of inferiority [44]. The self-esteem of numerous members within the community can be improved. A woman who feels useful is happy and satisfied; such a woman is the pillar of a happy and satisfied family, and a happy family is the pillar of a healthy nation. Sustainable tourism fundamentally incorporates gender equality and empowerment as essential elements [43].

Social empowerment enhances its emphasis on the relationships among community members and examines how the development of tourism influences the cohesion and collaborative capacity of the community. Tourism, as one of the fastest-developing industries [45], plays a role in maintaining or improving the equilibrium within the local community [43]. The efficiency of tourism plays a significant role in development and competitiveness [46]. According to Farooq et al. [47], an enhancement of cohesion occurs when individuals and families collaborate to establish a successful tourism enterprise. A portion of the funds generated is allocated to community development initiatives, such as constructing schools or enhancing water supply systems. The dimension of empowerment that is most frequently addressed in articles that adopt a unidimensional perspective of power dynamics within tourism development is political empowerment [44]. The needs and interests of all community groups are adequately represented within the political framework of the community. Tourism provides an opportunity to engage with the local lifestyle, offering insights into the living standards, social interactions, and cultural heritage of the area [48]. When women are empowered across the social, psychological, and economic dimensions, they are subsequently appointed to political positions. This, in turn, facilitates their political empowerment. In this way, cultural tourism contributes to enhanced political empowerment [49]. Therefore, it is imperative to develop cultural tourism initiatives at the local level.

The development of self-reliance among women through rural tourism encompasses a multifaceted approach that fosters independence and capability among women while enabling them to contribute significantly to their communities. Self-reliance can be defined as a state in which individuals or groups possess the skills, confidence, and resources to manage their own affairs and make independent choices. For women in rural areas, this translates into the ability to establish and manage hospitality services that cater to tourists, thereby generating an income and enhancing their social status. The benefits of self-reliance

are manifold: it not only boosts women's confidence and self-esteem but also enhances their decision-making abilities and increases their financial independence. For instance, initiatives like the "Women in Tourism" program in Kenya have successfully trained women to run lodges and guesthouses, showcasing how self-reliance can lead to thriving businesses that attract tourists while providing jobs to other community members [50]. Such case studies illustrate that when women are empowered through self-reliance programs, they can transform local hospitality landscapes and create opportunities for others.

To effectively implement hospitality services in rural tourism, it is crucial to adopt comprehensive strategies that focus on training and skill development for women. Programs that provide education on hospitality management, customer service, and culinary skills can equip women with the knowledge necessary to excel in this sector. Collaborations with local governments and non-profit organizations could further enhance these efforts as they can provide resources, mentorship, and financial support to women-led initiatives. For example, partnerships with organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have resulted in training workshops that empower women to market their services effectively and adhere to sustainable practices [51,52]. The promotion of eco-friendly hospitality services not only attracts environmentally conscious travelers but also reinforces women's roles as custodians of their cultural heritage and natural resources [53]. This holistic approach ensures that women are not only participants in the hospitality industry but also leaders who champion sustainable tourism practices that benefit their communities.

Creating job opportunities for women in rural communities is vital to foster economic growth and improve community well-being. The hospitality sector offers a range of potential job roles, from managing accommodations to providing guided tours and crafting local artisan products. Identifying these roles is essential for tailoring programs that equip women with the necessary skills. Moreover, developing microfinance programs can significantly empower women entrepreneurs by providing them with the capital needed to start their businesses. For instance, initiatives like the "Grameen Bank" model have effectively provided microloans to women in various sectors, including hospitality, thereby enabling them to become self-sufficient [54,55]. The impact of women's employment extends beyond individual benefits; it contributes to community well-being by increasing household incomes, promoting education, and reducing poverty levels. As women become economically active, they are more likely to invest in their families and communities, leading to overall economic growth and enhanced quality of life [56].

2.2. Women's Empowerment in the Context of Rural Tourism

In the context of rural tourism, women's empowerment is intricately connected to several foundational theories that emphasize the interplay between entrepreneurship, education, and social capital. Women's entrepreneurship is a pivotal factor that not only furthers their own empowerment but also underpins the sustainable growth of rural tourism [57]. This entrepreneurial engagement facilitates economic independence and enhances community development, creating a virtuous cycle of empowerment and sustainability. Education emerges as another crucial element, serving as both a gateway to empowerment and a catalyst for active participation in the tourism sector [38]. Through increased educational opportunities, women can acquire the skills and knowledge that constitute essential components of human capital, thereby boosting their involvement in rural tourism activities [36]. Moreover, the role of social capital—comprising networks and relationships—profoundly influences women's empowerment by providing the support and resources necessary for their entrepreneurial endeavors [29]. These interconnected elements of entrepreneurship, education, and social capital not only reinforce women's roles in rural tourism but also contribute to the broader goals of economic, environmental, and cultural development within rural communities [58]. To achieve these outcomes, targeted actions aimed at promoting women's empowerment, enhancing access to education,

and fostering supportive networks are essential to drive sustainable rural tourism and community development [29].

2.3. Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Community Transformation

Women's empowerment is a cornerstone for sustainable community transformation, as it addresses multifaceted aspects of development across the social, economic, and environmental domains [47]. Empowerment initiatives provide women with the ability to gain control over their lives, which catalyzes positive changes not just for themselves but also for their communities and broader society [59]. By challenging and correcting harmful social norms, empowered women help create equitable and sustainable communities, fostering an environment that encourages inclusive societal growth [60]. The empowerment of women also involves increasing their access to life-changing goods and services, such as quality education and healthcare, which further strengthens their role in community development and sustainability [50]. As women gain access to these foundational resources, their capacity to contribute effectively to community transformation is significantly enhanced, leading to broader social change and more robust community structures [47]. Thus, investing in women's empowerment is not merely an ethical imperative aligned with gender equality goals, such as those outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but also a pragmatic approach to achieving sustainable community transformation [59].

3. Materials and Methods

A total of 484 women, members of the Women's Association from 25 villages surrounding the Fruška Gora National Park in Serbia, took part in this research examining the effects of rural tourism on women in the following villages: Neštin, Banoštor, Rakovac, Susek, Krčedin, Maradik, Stari Slankamen, Čortanovci, Jazak, Vrdnik, Irig, Neradin, Rivica, Ledinci, Bešenovo, Grgurevci, Laćarak, Mandelos, Sremski Karlovci, Ljuba, Bikić Do, Erdevik, Morović, Privina Glava, and Sot.

In the year 2023, the female participants were attendees of significant ethnic festivals held within the vicinity of the Fruška Gora National Park. The data collection took place during the following events: "Pudarski dani" (translated as Grape Days) in the town of Irig; "Karlovačka berba grožđa" (translated as Grape Harvest of Sremski Karlovci) in Sremski Karlovci; and the "Ethno Festival" in Inđija. Women's associations were participants in these manifestations, and the authors approached the stands where they were located and collected the data. Each member played an active role in the association, irrespective of their personal and professional commitments. Each women's association typically had between five and the maximum of thirty members. In small villages, such as Neštin, there was only one women's association, with just two members. However, in bigger villages, such as Laćarak, there were four women's associations, with each of them comprising up to 30 members. Generally, all women from such associations participate in these festivals, excepting those justifiably prevented from doing so, and all of those who participate constitute a fully representative sample that does not differ from the rest of the group. The profile of the respondents is representative since all women in the association have similar interests. This was confirmed by the presidents of the association, who were also interviewed. The few women who were not married were mostly younger women, usually the daughters or sisters of other members. Unfortunately, the depopulation problem was present, as most young women who leave to study in cities stay there. The women in the villages are mostly married older women—this was confirmed by the details of the respondents.

The research commenced with preliminary hypothesis H, positing that rural tourism serves as an indicator of women's empowerment, leading to significant transformations within the rural communities in which women reside and work. Throughout this study, we endeavored to address two critical questions:

1. *“What actions would you undertake in the realm of rural tourism?” This inquiry aimed to establish hypothesis h1, which asserts that women participate in service-oriented activities and manual labor within rural tourism.*

2. *“What does the advancement of rural tourism signify for you on a personal level?” This question sought to formulate sub-hypothesis h2, which suggests that rural tourism acts as a catalyst of change for women.*

To address these two questions, the authors conducted a literature search and assembled answers that could be used to construct a questionnaire; that is, the most characteristic responses from the 24 potential answers that were collected, which were rated on a five-point Likert scale according to factor analysis and the determined interdependence. A multi-disciplinary methodology was used, combining a focus group data analysis and structured interviews with the participants. The researcher’s epistemological stances drew on social constructionism and conversion, where the practical reality was determined through observing the constructivism occurring in social contexts [61]. Identities, beliefs, and behaviors fell under the purview of social constructionism, while the conversion considered that one moment of change could lead to a transformation that can sustain change within a community. The data analysis was carried out in two stages. First, open themes from the literature were analyzed, and, then the primary data, using and developing the presented themes. These data were then subjected to a thematic analysis, using coding structures designed for questionnaires and interviews [62] and allowing themes to straightforwardly surface from the qualitative data of the focus groups and interviews in an iterative fashion, building on grounded theory. Grounded theory was developed as a methodology and designed as a particular form of research study that would allow for an unsparing, protracted, and very strenuous exploration; acute theoretical acumen and constructiveness should also be present in the themes which evolve [63].

During the inquiry, the women were introduced to the research objective, which they embraced wholeheartedly, motivating them to provide the most candid responses possible. The awareness that their answers might impact other women served as an additional source of inspiration. The questions were categorized into two distinct groups based on the responses. Each category comprised 12 items that participants needed to evaluate using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “I completely agree” to “I completely disagree”. Subsequently, two factor analyses were conducted to identify distinctive factors, followed by Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

The initial factor analysis yielded a model comprising three factors that categorized the respondents’ responses into three dimensions:

- Factor 1. Homemade food and beverages (F&B1 pertains to the production and sale of cured meat products, while F&B2 refers to the production and sale of wine, brandy, and homemade juices);
- Factor 2. Tourism and hospitality (T&H1 relates to accommodation and service management, and T&H2 involves the rental of bicycles and other means of transportation to tourists);
- Factor 3. Handicrafts and souvenirs (H&S1 encompasses the sale of organic products, and H&S2 is concerned with the production of pottery and other handicrafts).

The second factor analysis produced a model with three additional factors, which also organized the respondents’ answers into three dimensions:

- Factor 4. Empowerment (E1. Increased income for my household; E2. The chance to pursue my passions while earning a satisfactory living; E3. I perceive that I positively influence my daughters);
- Factor 5. Independence (I1. An opportunity to generate my own income; I2. Rural tourism provides me with a sense of utility as I sell all that I produce; I3. It allows me to avoid living in anyone’s shadow);

- Factor 6. Development (D1. A chance to enhance our village and ensure that children can continue to reside in their own homes; D2. An opportunity to connect with like-minded individuals and relish life in the countryside).

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) serves as a multivariate approach designed to illustrate the causal relationships among variables according to a structural model. This technique elucidates the links between dependent data through path coefficients that signify the strength of these relationships. SEM is a robust method, which is adept at addressing the multicollinearity that occurs when two or more variables exhibit a high degree of correlation. One advantage of SEM compared to multiple regression and factor analysis is that all elements of SEM must be guided by this correlation.

The development and modification of models rely heavily on theory. A significant misapplication of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) can take place when data are merely adjusted to fit an appropriate SEM, subsequently leading to the expansion of a theory based solely on the analytical outcomes.

4. Results and Discussion

Among the total respondents, 391 (80.8%) were married women, while 42 (8.7%) were unmarried women, 19 (3.9%) were divorced, and 32 (6.6%) were widows. In terms of age distribution, the majority fell within the 36–50 age range, comprising 161 individuals (33.3%), followed by those over 51 years, at 143 (29.5%), with 129 individuals (26.7%) in the 19–35 age group. The group with the smallest representation, at 51 individuals (10.5%), was those who were under 18. Regarding children, the largest proportion of women reported having two children, totaling 240 (49.6%), followed by 117 (24.2%) who had more than two children, 67 (13.8%) with one child, and 60 (12.4%) who had no children.

The initial factor analysis (see Table 1) yielded a model that categorized the variables into three distinct factors, collectively accounting for 60.546% of the variance.

Table 1. Total variance explained.

Factor	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3.647	30.392	30.392	2.752	22.937	22.937	2.879	23.993	23.993
2	3.065	25.544	55.936	1.195	9.960	32.897	2.870	23.914	47.907
3	2.612	21.769	77.705	2.929	24.410	57.306	1.876	15.632	63.539
4	1.246	10.387	88.092	3.196	26.637	83.943	1.830	15.250	78.790
5	1.006	8.385	96.478	1.204	10.035	93.978	1.823	15.188	93.978
6	0.105	0.871	97.348						
7	0.092	0.769	98.118						
8	0.076	0.633	98.751						
9	0.073	0.607	99.358						
10	0.051	0.428	99.786						
11	0.016	0.130	99.916						
12	0.010	0.084	100.000						

The isolated factors exhibiting the highest factor load revealed three distinct groupings of respondents' answers related to the inquiry, "What actions would you undertake in the realm of rural tourism?"

The findings presented in Table 2 indicate that women prefer activities that allow them to excel. Additionally, the data in Table 3 reveal that the average responses tend to cluster around the option “agree” regarding the statement provided. The first factor identified pertains to the sale and production of domestic goods, specifically food, drink, and meat products. A significant aspect of rural tourism lies in its ability to link producers with consumers, thereby facilitating sales and marketing networks. This connection particularly pertains to the relationship between producers of organic and local food and establishments that provide accommodation, dining, and beverages in both urban and rural settings, such as hotels, motels, and restaurants [64]. Specifically, individuals such as young people and women residing in villages, when engaged in food production, have the opportunity to sell their goods to restaurants and organize food and products within their rural homes. This aspect contributes positively to the enhancement of employment and income levels [38]. It is crucial to highlight that this form of service is highly regarded by tourists and visitors, who frequently express a desire to experience authentic food and products, thereby influencing consumption patterns and fostering the development of rural areas.

Table 2. Factor matrix ^a.

	Factor				
	1	2	3	4	5
v1	−0.246	0.059	0.042	0.807	0.525
v2	0.006	−0.048	0.998	0.024	−0.022
v3	−0.157	0.021	0.185	−0.838	0.484
v4	0.813	−0.583	0.000	0.000	0.000
v5	0.774	0.462	−0.007	0.026	−0.064
v6	−0.246	0.111	0.018	0.769	0.481
v7	0.003	0.012	0.944	0.006	−0.002
v8	−0.153	0.005	0.178	−0.778	0.441
v9	0.777	−0.523	0.012	−0.026	0.020
v10	0.813	0.583	0.000	0.000	0.000
v11	−0.244	0.079	0.049	0.803	0.513
v12	−0.003	−0.060	0.986	0.018	−0.020

Extraction method: maximum likelihood. ^a Attempted to extract five factors; more than 25 iterations required.

Table 3. Dependent variables grouped in F1, F2, and F3.

		F&B1	F&B2	T&H1	T&H2	H&S1	H&S2
N	Valid	484	484	484	484	484	484
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		1.99	2.04	2.04	2.06	2.24	2.04
Std. Error of Mean		0.053	0.052	0.053	0.053	0.056	0.054
Median		2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
Mode		1	1	1	1	2	1
Std. Deviation		1.165	1.146	1.161	1.173	1.228	1.182

Factor 2 categorized responses related to the delivery of services, including accommodation services, hospitality services, and a range of rental services. As rural tourism occurs on agricultural farms, an individual may offer catering services in these areas if they own a family-run agricultural farm [65]. Such establishments not only provide accommodation but also the prepare and serve food and beverages sourced from the farm, in addition to various supplementary services. This suggests that young individuals have the opportunity to cultivate rural tourism on their farms, thereby generating an income while simultaneously enhancing employment prospects in rural regions. As village stays have emerged as the primary form of recreational tourism, it is evident why women are increasingly choosing to utilize various rental services. Rural tourism fosters job creation, enriches the tourism offerings, and aids in mitigating migration towards urban centers [66].

The third factor categorized responses related to various handicrafts. A considerable proportion of women living in rural regions participate in informal work, operate without legal authorization, or are engaged in seasonal employment. Among the diverse range of creative professions that have the potential to provide an income, the crafting of handicrafts is particularly noteworthy. However, it is crucial to cultivate specific skills to successfully undertake this pursuit. It is essential for society to acknowledge and honor women who create high-quality handicrafts, as they serve as custodians of tradition and are adept artisans of a craft that holds immense significance for every nation.

The women in these villages engage in a diverse array of handicrafts, which include white embroidery, gold embroidery, weaving, crocheting, knitting, painting, lace bread making, painting, and the creation of eco-friendly toys such as amigurumi. Furthermore, the offerings encompass natural cosmetics, particularly handmade soaps and creams crafted from natural oils and butters, in addition to medicinal salves derived from calendula and other therapeutic plants, along with propolis, pollen, and honey. By engaging in the creation and sale of handicrafts and a range of products, women provide either a primary or a supplementary source of income, which is especially significant in rural areas where employment opportunities are limited. The association frequently arranges workshops and training sessions aimed at assisting women in enhancing and refining their craft and entrepreneurial abilities.

The “Women in Tourism” program in Kenya serves as a powerful testament to the potential of targeted initiatives to promote gender equality and economic empowerment [50]. By equipping women with essential skills in management and hospitality, the program has not only transformed individual lives but also enhanced the quality of services offered in the tourism sector [51,52]. The successful provision of accommodation and hospitality services, and the sale and production of domestic goods, specifically food, drink, meat products, and rental services by trained women illustrates the tangible impact of this initiative on local economies and community engagement. As the tourism industry in Kenya continues to evolve, the empowerment of women remains a critical component in fostering sustainable development and enriching the experiences of visitors. Ultimately, the program exemplifies how strategic interventions can lead to significant societal change, paving the way for a more inclusive and prosperous future in tourism [53].

Thus, we obtained a response to the inquiry: “What actions would you undertake in the realm of rural tourism?” This confirms sub-hypothesis h1: women participate in service-oriented activities and manual labor within rural tourism.

Following the initial phase, a subsequent factor analysis was performed (Table 4). This process resulted in the formulation of a model that categorized the variables into three distinct factors, collectively accounting for 74.670% of the variance.

Table 4. Total variance explained.

Factor	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3.548	29.566	29.566	2.815	23.462	23.462	2.781	23.172	23.172
2	2.934	24.446	54.013	3.308	27.569	51.031	2.758	22.985	46.157
3	2.479	20.658	74.671	2.016	16.802	67.833	1.945	16.205	62.362
4	1.240	10.337	85.008	1.170	9.750	77.583	1.826	15.221	77.583
5	0.992	8.264	93.271						
6	0.191	1.590	94.862						
7	0.153	1.278	96.140						
8	0.133	1.109	97.249						
9	0.112	0.936	98.185						
10	0.096	0.804	98.989						
11	0.075	0.622	99.611						
12	0.047	0.389	100.000						

The isolated factors exhibiting the highest factor load revealed three distinct groupings of respondents' answers related to the inquiry: "What does the advancement of rural tourism signify for you on a personal level"?

The motives for women's participation in rural tourism were indicated by all three factors and hold significant importance for the advancement of female entrepreneurship in rural areas (Table 5). Additionally, the data in Table 6 reveal that the average responses tended to cluster around the option "agree" regarding the statement provided.

Table 5. Factor matrix ^a.

	Factor			
	1	2	3	4
v1	0.048	0.929	−0.224	0.151
v2	0.993	0.012	0.031	−0.010
v3	0.197	−0.586	−0.662	0.285
v4	0.055	−0.205	0.411	0.086
v5	0.004	−0.130	0.620	0.637
v6	0.029	0.906	−0.188	0.142
v7	0.924	0.015	0.032	0.017
v8	0.170	−0.569	−0.675	0.288
v9	0.054	−0.211	0.367	0.109
v10	0.008	−0.132	0.555	0.721
v11	0.042	0.914	−0.200	0.117
v12	0.947	−0.027	−0.008	−0.063

Extraction method: Maximum likelihood. ^a Four factors extracted; 16 iterations required.

Table 6. Dependent variables grouped in F4, F5, and F6.

		E1	E2	E3	I1	I2	I3	D1	D2
N	Valid	484	484	484	484	484	484	484	484
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Mean	2.00	2.01	1.94	2.05	2.03	2.03	2.18	2.09
	Std. Error of Mean	0.053	0.052	0.052	0.054	0.053	0.052	0.055	0.053
	Median	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
	Mode	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Std. Deviation	1.168	1.148	1.145	1.178	1.157	1.153	1.201	1.159

One of these factors is empowerment, which occurs when women achieve economic independence (Factor 4). The economic autonomy of women serves as an essential prerequisite for attaining gender equality within society. Facilitating women's empowerment through the advancement of female entrepreneurship not only provides substantial economic potential but also contributes significantly to the development of any nation. A prominent priority that emerges is the sentiment that, through employment, one can not only support their family but can also attend to their own needs. This indicates that a woman engaged in rural tourism is doubly empowered, as she has the capacity to contribute to both her personal well-being and that of her family. Alongside this, we identified factor 5: independence. To be self-sufficient and independent fundamentally entails "managing one's own affairs", fostering a sense of usefulness and pride, which ultimately equates to freedom. The education of women holds significant importance in facilitating the understanding that distinctions between "women's and men's jobs" are unfounded. It is essential for women to recognize their entitlement to time, education, and personal choices. This awareness ultimately fosters women's independence. An educated woman emerges as a valuable, equal, and empowered participant within her household, possessing her own rights. The next factor, identified as factor 6, pertains to development. In this context, the women highlighted two specific areas of development: personal development and village development.

A significant proportion of rural women in Serbia lack ownership of a house (88%), land (84%), or any resources for agricultural production. Women constitute the majority (74%) of unpaid assisting members within agricultural holdings. Approximately 12% of rural women are without health insurance and 60% are excluded from the pension insurance system. The inability to afford pension insurance independently affects unpaid assisting members of agricultural farms, with 93% citing financial constraints as the reason for this [67]. It is evident that this situation results in young women migrating from the village to urban areas, ultimately leading to the village's demise. Engaging in tourism within these villages provides women with the chance to positively impact their children, particularly their daughters, thereby helping to stave off the village's decline. Furthermore, it enhances the villages, transforming them into attractive places for residence. Additionally, personal growth is closely linked to education, learning, meeting new individuals, and broadening one's perspectives. The advancement of rural tourism empowers women to feel comfortable in their identities, pursue their passions, and reside in the communities in which their roots lie. In the villages, women do not have working hours. Their day starts at five in the morning and finishes after dusk. There are no statistics recording this, and women often do not exercise the right to pension, disability, and health insurance. However, rural women possess a powerful amount of knowledge, capabilities, and experience managing a household, as well as placing great importance on the preservation of traditional crafts and handicrafts. All of these qualities could translate into activities that enhance rural tourism, in which younger women could take part. This widens the circle of advantages obtained from engaging in rural tourism.

Thus, we obtained a response to the inquiry “What does the advancement of rural tourism signify for you on a personal level?” This confirms sub-hypothesis h2: rural tourism acts as a catalyst of change for women.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), as illustrated by the representative graph (Figure 1), reveals the interdependence among the identified factors, both in relation to one another and with distinct isolated attitudes. As shown in Table 7, factor 3 exerts a positive influence on factor 1, indicating that the production of souvenirs and handicrafts is directly and positively reliant on the production and sale of domestic products. It can be concluded that these two factors are compatible, and, furthermore, women’s motivation to participating in rural tourism can be categorized into these two factors, which are mutually and positively influenced. Conversely, factors 1 and 2 are fundamentally opposing and tend to suppress one another. Specifically, women either engage in service activities or focus on product-oriented endeavors, with these two focuses thereby excluding each other. A potential link between them is represented by the “shop”, where handmade products and souvenirs can be purchased within accommodation facilities.

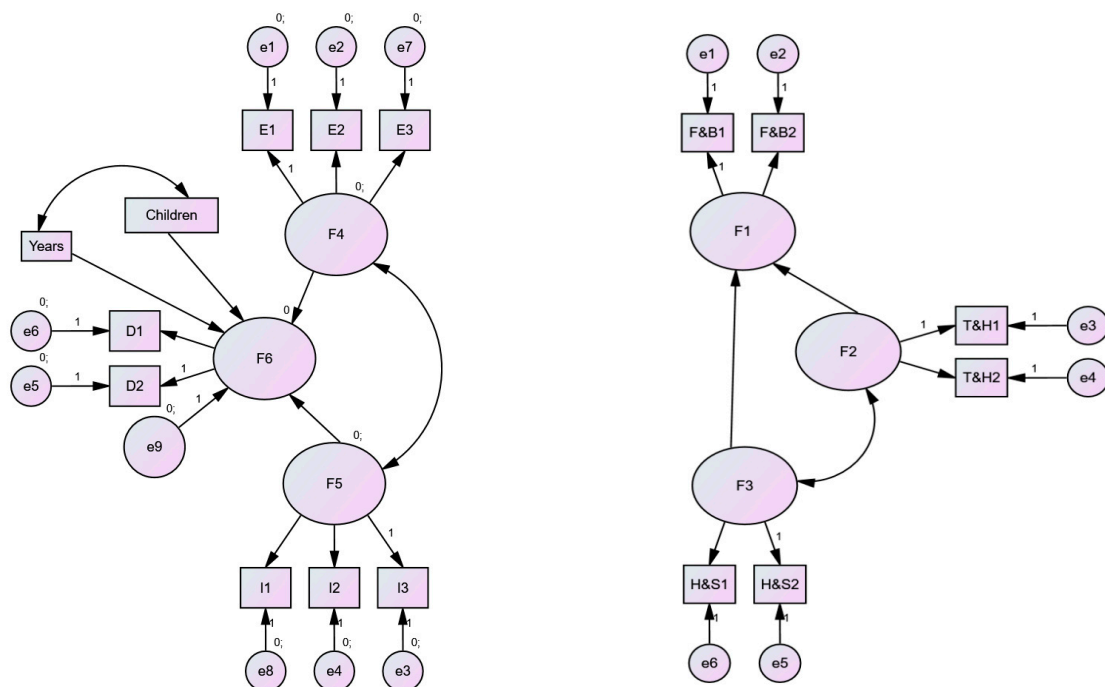


Figure 1. Structural equation modeling (SEM). Source: prepared by the authors (2024).

Table 8 indicates that factor 5 exerts a positive effect on factor 6, demonstrating that the sense of independence among women directly contributes to personal development as well as the broader social community in which a woman resides and operates. A woman who is economically independent will experience empowerment, which in turn will yield beneficial outcomes for her surroundings. Conversely, the absence of economic independence, coupled with a woman’s position in “someone’s shadow” or a subordinate role, adversely affects her entire existence. In such circumstances, she is likely to feel not only disempowered but also marginalized, ostracized, and insignificant. This will adversely effect factor 6, development. It is evident that, over time, these villages are likely to face significant depopulation. As illustrated in Table 8, younger generations negatively influence factor 6, development. The presumption is that both young men and women would choose to remain in their villages if they were afforded the opportunity to live and work in a manner that is satisfactory. When juxtaposed with findings that suggest that age does not impact the development factor, it becomes apparent that the involvement of women in rural tourism and their empowerment is crucial for the sustainable transformation of rural

communities. This further substantiates the initial hypothesis that rural tourism serves as an indicator of women's empowerment, and can lead to substantial transformations within the rural communities inhabited by these women.

Table 7. Standardized regression weights: (group number 1—default model).

			Estimate
F1	<---	F3	0.842
F1	<---	F2	−0.545
F&B1	<---	F1	0.047
F&B2	<---	F1	0.060
T&H1	<---	F2	9.329
T&H2	<---	F2	0.028
H&S1	<---	F3	1.168
H&S2	<---	F3	0.795
Factor 1	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	47.422	12	0.000
	38.308	12	0.000
Factor 2	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	29.804	12	0.003
	41.692	12	0.000
Factor 3	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	33.283	12	0.001
	71.238	12	0.000

Table 8. Standardized regression weights: (group number 1—default model).

			Estimate
F6	<---	F4	−0.377
F6	<---	F5	0.106
F6	<---	children	−0.215
F6	<---	age	0.224
E1	<---	F4	0.970
E2	<---	F4	0.935
E3	<---	F5	0.946
I1	<---	F5	0.923
I2	<---	F6	0.452
I3	<---	F6	0.725
D1	<---	F4	0.943
D2	<---	F5	0.995
Factor 4	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (two-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	38.705	12	0.000
	39.194	12	0.000
	36.887	12	0.000
Factor 5	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (two-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	35.260	12	0.000
	30.366	12	0.002
	42.305	12	0.000
Factor 6	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (two-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	70.304	12	0.000
	26.987	12	0.008

The results from the Pearson Chi-Square tests for each item are presented in Tables 7 and 8. These appear to show statistical significance in the answers, as $p = 0$ or is close to 0. This would be logical, given the other research results, primarily the diversity in the answers regarding the choice of activity among women engaged in rural tourism. Also, there are differences in the answers regarding how the respondents experience rural tourism and what individual meaning it has for their lives. The statistical significance is influenced respondents' sibling status, whether they have children or not, and their age.

All of the model fitting indicators, as shown in Table 9, indicate acceptable fit. An RMSEA value of 0.082 (between 0.05 and 0.08) indicates a good fit. Higher values (>0.90) of CFI (0.905), TLI (0.996), and GFI (0.935) indicate a good fit.

Table 9. Model fitting indicators.

CFI	0.905
TLI	0.996
GFI	0.935
RMSEA	0.082

The transformation of communities through rural tourism is evident in various economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Economically, rural tourism has become a catalyst for community development, leading to job creation and an increased income for local families. This is particularly significant for women, who often find new opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship in the tourism sector. The social and cultural impacts are equally profound, as tourism fosters a greater recognition of women's contributions to community life, enhancing their status and agency. In many rural areas, the visibility of women in tourism roles has challenged traditional gender norms, encouraging a more equitable distribution of responsibilities and opportunities. However, challenges remain, including the need for infrastructure improvements and the potential for cultural commodification. Opportunities exist to foster community transformation through targeted tourism initiatives that engage local stakeholders and prioritize inclusivity. For instance, capacity-building programs focused on women in tourism could empower them further, equipping them with the skills necessary to thrive in a competitive market. By addressing these challenges and leveraging the opportunities presented by rural tourism, communities in Serbia can cultivate a sustainable and equitable future that benefits all members, particularly women, who are instrumental in driving this change.

5. Conclusions

When empowered effectively, women in rural areas possess the potential and obligation to assume leadership roles as catalysts for change within their communities, influencing their economic, social, health, and educational landscapes. Through these efforts, they can lay the groundwork for a sustainable and prosperous economy in every community. The knowledge and skills provided to women through their cohesive knowledge base, along with workshops and lectures, are transversal in nature, allowing for their application across various aspects of both private and public life.

The research highlighted several key elements regarding the evolution of rural tourism within villages. It revealed that women are eager to participate in women's associations, in which they experience empowerment in various forms, and this sense of empowerment fosters a positive outlook, prompting them to become involved in rural tourism. Furthermore, the findings indicated that the primary activities undertaken by women in relation to rural tourism involve various handicrafts, including food and beverage production, as well as other artisanal crafts. In addition, women engage in service-related tasks, such as renting accommodations, preparing and serving meals, and providing the transportation necessary for enhancing the experience in rural locales. Regarding their motivations and attitudes towards participating in rural tourism, the responses encompassed themes such

as empowerment, independence, and development, reflecting the desire among village women to enhance, transform, and exert an influence over their lives and their communities, particularly concerning their female children.

For an extended period, women in rural communities were overshadowed by their male counterparts and partners. The call for emancipation emerged when women recognized their potential to “achieve more”. Indeed, women possess the ability to contribute beyond the role of unpaid homemakers. To feel valuable and fulfilled, and to exert a greater influence over their children, economic participation is essential. This influence begins with their daughters, who can be provided with positive role models. A woman ought not to remain silent or submissively comply with directives; rather, every woman is entitled to express her thoughts, pursue personal development, manage her own life, and earn and save money through honest and equitable means, just as men do.

In the European Union, rural regions account for 45% of newly generated value and employ 53% of the total workforce. Over 56% of the population resides in these areas, which encompass more than 91% of the EU’s territory [67]. The European Union has embraced the notion of fostering sustainable development in rural areas; this development is in sustainable economic progress, which aims to enhance living standards while simultaneously safeguarding natural, cultural, and traditional heritage. Consequently, rural regions in contemporary Europe are evolving into ecologically preserved and well-cultivated spaces that are systematically equipped with a communal and social infrastructure. These areas promote sustainable agriculture and local entrepreneurship, fostering connections with their environment. Such settings not only become desirable places to live but also attract investments, offering potential for growth in employment opportunities and an improved quality of life for their residents. In Serbia, rural areas are characterized as regions that constitute the “rest” of the country, beyond urban locales. Based on this characterization, approximately 70% of Serbia’s territory is categorized as rural, hosting 43% of the overall population [67]. Nonetheless, this classification does not align with the perspective of the European Union (EU). To facilitate comparison with the EU’s statistical information, rural areas in Serbia were defined according to the criteria set by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), as regions with a population density of fewer than 150 inhabitants per km². Under this definition, 85% of Serbia’s territory falls within the category of a rural area, encompassing nearly 55% of the total population [67]. Rural regions are not only home to a significant portion of the country’s human resources but also contain the majority of its natural resources, including agricultural land, forests, and water. These areas boast rich ecosystems and biodiversity, alongside various economic activities and a wealth of cultural and historical heritage.

Taking these data into consideration, it is obvious how important rural tourism and the empowerment of women are. Furthermore, women can not only assist in the development of rural tourism but could also transform the entire social community. Women “fighting” for their rights automatically changes their relationships and the conditions of life and work. Moreover, a possibility is provided for younger generations to stay in the villages through their engagement in rural tourism, hence providing the necessary financial resources for a decent life.

Women’s associations empower women through the implementation of new ways of life, demonstration of easier ways of completing work, an introduction to the digital world, the provision of equipment that enables women to use new technologies, and the provision of equipment that allows for the safer production of goods (greenhouses, diggers), as well as equipment for processing fruit and vegetables and education on processing and placing products, and how to better use the provided equipment.

It should be noted that the study sample is, of course, a constraining factor. The respondents were women who were part of certain women’s associations. One may assume this may influence the answers provided by the respondents. The respondents are empowered; therefore, this could influence their assessment of the effects of empowerment. In the future, studies should aim to reach those women who do not belong to such associations. However,

the responses obtained from the members of these women's associations from different villages provide significant encouragement for further research and work to be carried out in the field of women's empowerment and emancipation, especially young women, on whom the future and survival of rural villages depends. In summary, the interplay between women's empowerment, sustainable practices, and community transformation in rural tourism in Serbia represents a promising avenue for fostering economic development and social change. By empowering women to take on active roles in the tourism sector, Serbia could not only acknowledge their contributions but also harness their potential to drive sustainable practices that benefit their communities. As rural tourism continues to evolve, it offers a unique platform for redefining gender roles, promoting sustainability, and ultimately transforming the socio-economic landscape of rural areas. The path forward requires a continued commitment to supporting women in tourism, cultivating sustainable practices, and addressing the challenges that arise along the way, ensuring that the benefits of rural tourism are felt by all community members.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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