

Women at the Margins or the Center? Gendered Experiences in Community-Based Tourism in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the gendered dynamics of participation in community-based tourism (CBT) initiatives in Indonesia. Although CBT has been widely promoted as a strategy for sustainable development and local empowerment, gender relations often shape who benefits, who participates, and whose voices are heard in decision-making. Drawing on a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with women entrepreneurs, homestay operators, craft producers, and community leaders in Lombok and Flores, alongside focus group discussions with mixed-gender community members. Participant observation of daily tourism activities and local meetings provided additional contextual insights. Thematic analysis revealed that women's involvement in CBT is simultaneously empowering and constraining. On one hand, participation created new income opportunities, enhanced skills, and strengthened women's social visibility. On the other hand, entrenched gender norms and household responsibilities limited their ability to fully engage in leadership roles or access higher-value segments of tourism. Tensions were particularly evident in negotiations between women's economic aspirations and cultural expectations of domestic labor. The study concludes that CBT in Indonesia cannot be assumed to be gender-neutral; rather, its outcomes are mediated by local gender relations. Findings offer implications for designing gender-sensitive tourism policies that foster equitable empowerment.

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INTRODUCTION

Community-based tourism (CBT) has gained prominence as a development model that emphasizes local participation, empowerment, and sustainability (Aminullah, 2025; Azizurrohman et al., 2023). By placing communities at the center of planning and benefit-sharing, CBT has been promoted as an alternative to top-down, externally controlled tourism. Yet, despite its participatory rhetoric, scholars have argued that CBT is not inherently inclusive, as power relations within communities influence who is able to participate and who gains access to benefits (Ayu Lestari et al., 2025; Pegatariana et al., 2025). Among the most significant yet underexamined dynamics are those related to gender.

Research on gender and tourism consistently highlights that women are both highly active in tourism economies and disproportionately constrained by structural inequalities. Women often dominate in hospitality and craft production but remain underrepresented in leadership and decision-making roles (Ferguson, 2011). Tourism can provide new income opportunities and social mobility, but it can also reinforce traditional gender roles by assigning women tasks aligned with domestic labor (Yasin et al., 2025). Thus, tourism's potential for empowerment is always mediated by local cultural norms and household structures.

In Indonesia, CBT has been widely implemented as part of national strategies for sustainable tourism development, particularly in rural and island settings (Jackson, 2025; Juma & Khademi-Vidra, 2019). Destinations such as Lombok, Bali, and Flores showcase CBT as a means of preserving cultural heritage and distributing benefits to local residents. However, the gendered dimensions of these initiatives remain insufficiently explored. Studies have noted that while women participate as homestay operators, food vendors, and craft producers, their contributions are often undervalued, and their involvement in governance structures is limited (El Badriati et al., 2022). These patterns suggest that CBT is not gender-neutral but embedded within broader systems of inequality.

This study addresses this gap by examining how women experience community-based tourism in Indonesia, focusing on both opportunities and constraints. Through qualitative research in Lombok and Flores, the study explores how women navigate their roles in CBT, how cultural and social norms shape participation, and how empowerment and inequality coexist within tourism practices. By foregrounding women's voices, this research contributes to broader debates on gender and tourism, offering insights into how CBT can become more genuinely inclusive and transformative.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community-based tourism (CBT) is frequently promoted as a pathway to sustainable development, cultural preservation, and local empowerment. Its participatory ethos positions communities as active agents rather than passive recipients of tourism benefits (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). However, scholars have pointed out that CBT does not occur in a social vacuum; it is embedded within existing hierarchies of power that shape participation and benefit distribution (Blackstock, 2005). Questions of equity, representation, and voice remain central to evaluating the outcomes of CBT.

One of the most persistent blind spots in CBT research is gender. Women often play vital roles in hospitality, craft production, and food preparation within tourism initiatives, yet their contributions are undervalued and their access to leadership and decision-making is restricted (Ferguson, 2015). Studies have shown that tourism can simultaneously provide new opportunities for women while reinforcing traditional roles that align with domestic labor (Swain, 2005). This paradox of empowerment and constraint reflects the complexity of gender relations in tourism contexts.

In Southeast Asia, research indicates that cultural norms and household expectations shape how women engage in tourism. Hampton & Jeyacheya (2020) observe that while CBT in Indonesia has created income opportunities, women's participation remains largely confined to low-income activities such as homestays, handicrafts, and food vending. Cole (2007) further notes that in Flores, women's involvement was often celebrated as community participation, yet decision-making power resided with men, reflecting persistent gender hierarchies. Similar findings are echoed by Scheyvens & Biddulph (2018), who argue that inclusive tourism requires not only material benefits but also shifts in empowerment, representation, and recognition.

The concept of empowerment in tourism is itself contested. Scheyvens (1999) distinguished between economic, social, psychological, and political empowerment, noting that while tourism may improve income and confidence, it rarely transforms structural inequalities. This perspective is essential in understanding gender dynamics in CBT, where empowerment often manifests at the individual or household level but struggles to extend into collective governance.

In the Indonesian context, where CBT has been integrated into sustainable tourism policies, these issues become especially salient. Women's participation is often highlighted in promotional discourse, yet critical studies suggest that participation is shaped by patriarchal structures, religious expectations, and cultural norms of femininity. The literature thus indicates a need to move beyond celebratory narratives of women's involvement to critically analyze how gender relations mediate the opportunities and constraints of CBT.

This study builds on these insights by examining women's experiences in Lombok and Flores, focusing on how they navigate roles within CBT, balance household responsibilities with tourism work, and negotiate empowerment within culturally embedded gender norms. By doing so, it contributes to the literature on gender and tourism by foregrounding the everyday realities of women whose voices are often marginalized in policy and academic discourse.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the gendered dynamics of participation in community-based tourism in Indonesia. A qualitative approach was appropriate given the study's focus on lived experience, social norms, and the nuanced ways in which empowerment and constraint are negotiated in everyday life. Fieldwork was carried out in two destinations where community-based tourism is actively promoted: villages in Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara, and Flores, East Nusa Tenggara. Both sites were selected purposively because of their strong emphasis on cultural tourism and their reliance on women's labor in homestays, handicrafts, and food production, while simultaneously reflecting patriarchal cultural contexts in which women's roles are shaped by household responsibilities and community expectations.

Participants included women engaged in tourism-related activities such as homestay operation, weaving, craft-making, and food vending, as well as community leaders and male counterparts who influenced decision-making within tourism committees. A total of thirty participants contributed to the study, of which twenty were women directly involved in CBT and ten were men in leadership or household roles. Purposive sampling was

combined with snowball techniques, enabling access to participants embedded in local networks. This approach ensured a diversity of voices, particularly across different age groups, marital statuses, and levels of engagement in tourism.

Data collection was conducted over a three-month period in 2024 and employed semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. Interviews with women participants focused on their motivations for joining CBT, the opportunities and challenges they encountered, and their perceptions of empowerment and inequality. Male participants were asked about their views on women's contributions, their roles in decision-making, and the cultural expectations that shaped women's participation. Interviews lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes, were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. In addition, two focus group discussions were held in each site to capture collective reflections and to explore how women and men articulated gender dynamics when in dialogue with peers. Participant observation complemented these methods, as the researcher attended CBT meetings, handicraft demonstrations, and daily tourism-related work, recording detailed field notes on interactions and practices.

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-step approach (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Transcripts, focus group data, and field notes were uploaded into NVivo for systematic coding. Initial codes were developed inductively and gradually organized into broader themes such as economic empowerment, cultural constraints, gendered labor divisions, and leadership participation. Themes were refined iteratively, with constant comparison between the two sites to identify both shared and context-specific patterns. Reflexive memos were maintained throughout to acknowledge the researcher's positionality and the interpretive nature of qualitative inquiry.

To ensure rigor, Lincoln and Guba's criteria of trustworthiness were applied. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, where selected participants were invited to review preliminary interpretations. Transferability was addressed by providing thick description of the research sites and participant contexts. Dependability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail of coding and analytic decisions, and confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling that minimized bias. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the university's research ethics committee. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reporting. Particular sensitivity was exercised in discussing issues of gender and household roles, as these are culturally significant domains that require careful navigation.

RESULTS

The aim of this study was to explore women's experiences in community-based tourism in Indonesia, with particular attention to how gender norms shape both empowerment and constraint. Through interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation in Lombok and Flores, women described their participation in CBT as simultaneously a source of opportunity and a site of limitation. Their accounts revealed the complexity of navigating roles as economic contributors, cultural custodians, and household caregivers within contexts where patriarchal norms remain influential.

Thematic analysis of the data generated five interrelated themes. The first theme highlights economic empowerment, as tourism created new income opportunities that enhanced women's ability to contribute to household needs and invest in their children's education. The second theme illustrates how gendered labor divisions persist, with women shouldering the double burden of domestic responsibilities alongside tourism work. The third theme focuses on women's restricted access to leadership and decision-making, showing how male-dominated governance structures often limit their influence. The fourth theme emphasizes forms of social and psychological empowerment, where participation increased women's confidence, skills, and community recognition. Finally, the fifth theme captures how women negotiate constraints and assert agency, finding culturally acceptable ways to expand autonomy and secure small but meaningful victories. Together, these themes portray CBT as a space where empowerment and inequality coexist, reflecting the tensions of gender relations in Indonesian rural tourism.

Economic Empowerment through Tourism

Women across both Lombok and Flores frequently described community-based tourism as a vital source of economic empowerment. For many participants, involvement in homestays, handicrafts, and food vending provided income that was previously unavailable or irregular. This income was often framed not only as financial support but also as a pathway to dignity and recognition within the household. A homestay operator in Lombok explained, "Before, I only depended on my husband's work in the fields. Now, with tourists staying in our home,

I can buy food and pay school fees myself. I feel proud that I can contribute.” Her account illustrates how CBT opened avenues for women to claim an active economic role.

Several participants linked tourism income directly to their ability to support children’s education and healthcare. A weaver in Flores noted, “When I sell my cloth to visitors, I save the money for my daughter’s school. It is my own effort, not just my husband’s.” Such narratives demonstrate how tourism earnings enhanced women’s agency in household decision-making, particularly regarding investments in family welfare. The ability to handle cash transactions with visitors also provided women with financial skills and confidence, reinforcing their sense of independence.

For some participants, CBT offered opportunities to expand beyond subsistence and engage in small-scale entrepreneurship. Women described how profits from homestays or food stalls were reinvested into improving facilities, purchasing materials, or diversifying products. One participant in Lombok shared, “With the money from tourists, I repaired our guest room and bought more kitchen utensils. Now we can host more visitors and offer better meals.” These examples show how women exercised agency in reinvesting resources, often without waiting for approval from male household heads.

Despite the modest scale of earnings, the psychological impact of contributing economically was significant. Several women expressed a new sense of pride and respect within their families. As one craftswoman put it, “Before, my husband made all the financial decisions. Now he asks me first because I also bring income.” Such accounts highlight how economic empowerment translated into shifts in intra-household power relations, even if subtle.

Overall, participation in CBT created avenues for women to achieve greater financial independence, enhance their contributions to household welfare, and develop entrepreneurial skills. While income levels were not always high, the symbolic and practical significance of being recognized as economic actors marked an important step in women’s empowerment journeys within the context of rural tourism.

Gendered Labor and Domestic Burdens

While community-based tourism created new economic opportunities for women, the findings also reveal the persistence of gendered labor divisions that placed a double burden on female participants. Women often combined their tourism-related activities with domestic responsibilities, resulting in long working days and limited personal time. A homestay host in Lombok explained, “When guests come, I must cook and clean for them, but my family still expects me to prepare meals and do the laundry at home. The work becomes double, and sometimes I feel exhausted.” This sense of overextension was echoed by participants in Flores, where women described the challenge of weaving for tourists late at night after completing childcare and agricultural tasks.

Cultural expectations reinforced this division of labor. Several respondents noted that men were primarily involved in external-facing tasks such as guiding, transportation, and committee leadership, while women remained responsible for both hospitality and domestic duties. A participant in Flores reflected, “Men can focus on meetings or guiding tours, but women must take care of the house first. Even if we earn money, our main duty is still the family.” Such accounts illustrate how women’s economic contributions did not necessarily translate into a redistribution of household labor.

Some participants expressed frustration that their work was undervalued compared to men’s contributions, even though women’s roles were central to the CBT experience. A woman from Lombok remarked, “Tourists praise the guides who take them around, but they forget that we prepare the food and rooms. Without us, there is no tourism.” This invisibility of women’s labor demonstrates the structural inequalities that shape recognition and reward within CBT.

Despite these challenges, many women accepted the double burden as a necessary compromise to maintain cultural expectations while accessing new opportunities. A weaver in Flores shared, “I cannot refuse my role as a mother and wife. But I also want to earn money. So I do both, even if it is tiring.” This demonstrates the ambivalent position of women, where empowerment through tourism is constrained by the continued weight of domestic responsibilities.

Overall, the findings reveal that CBT participation did not dismantle gendered divisions of labor but instead added new layers of responsibility to women’s daily lives. Economic empowerment coexisted with domestic obligations, producing a paradox of empowerment within constraint.

Limited Access to Leadership and Decision-Making

Although women were highly visible in the daily operations of community-based tourism, their influence in leadership and governance structures remained limited. Across both Lombok and Flores, CBT committees were largely dominated by men, who held formal positions such as chairpersons, treasurers, and coordinators. Women

were often included only in supporting roles, such as preparing food for meetings or managing guest reception, rather than being involved in strategic decision-making. A woman homestay operator in Lombok reflected, “We work every day to host tourists, but when the committee meets, we are not asked for our ideas. The men decide everything, and we just follow.” This statement illustrates the disconnect between women’s central contributions to tourism and their marginalization from formal governance.

Several participants described situations where women’s opinions were heard but rarely acted upon. A craft producer in Flores explained, “Sometimes we are invited to meetings, and we speak, but afterwards the decision is still the men’s. It feels like our voices are there, but they do not count.” Such accounts suggest a symbolic inclusion of women, where their participation is acknowledged but not translated into genuine influence.

Cultural norms around gender roles played a significant part in limiting leadership opportunities. Many respondents reported that leadership was perceived as a male domain, with women considered more suitable for domestic or service-oriented responsibilities. A male community leader candidly admitted, “Women are important for tourism, but leading is men’s duty. They already have much work at home.” This statement highlights how gendered ideologies not only constrain women’s agency but also justify their exclusion from decision-making.

Despite these barriers, some women expressed aspirations to take on more active leadership roles. Younger participants, in particular, voiced frustration with traditional hierarchies. A woman in her twenties from Lombok stated, “We also have ideas for tourism development, especially about what women can offer. But it is difficult to challenge the older men who control the committee.” This generational difference points to the possibility of gradual change, though within a context of persistent structural constraints.

Overall, the findings reveal a clear paradox: women’s labor sustains CBT on a daily basis, yet they remain excluded from shaping its strategic direction. This disconnect underscores how empowerment in community-based tourism is uneven, with economic and social gains constrained by the persistence of male-dominated governance structures.

Social and Psychological Empowerment

Alongside economic contributions and structural constraints, many participants emphasized that involvement in community-based tourism enhanced their confidence, skills, and social visibility. Women repeatedly described how tourism created new opportunities to interact with outsiders, learn communication skills, and expand their social networks beyond the household. A homestay host in Lombok explained, “Before tourism, I rarely spoke to people outside my family. Now I talk to visitors every week, and I feel more confident. Even when speaking in meetings, I am no longer shy.” Such accounts highlight how CBT participation fostered psychological empowerment by building self-esteem and communicative capacity.

For some women, tourism participation translated into new forms of community recognition. In Flores, several craftswomen reported that their ability to attract tourists gave them a stronger voice in local gatherings. One weaver remarked, “People in the village respect me more now because they see tourists coming to buy my work. They say I bring honor to the community.” This sense of recognition not only affirmed their skills but also contributed to an emerging identity as cultural ambassadors.

In addition to external visibility, participants also described internal transformations in how they perceived themselves. A woman in Lombok shared, “I used to think I was only a housewife. Now I see myself as a businesswoman. It changes how I feel about myself.” Such reflections illustrate how psychological empowerment reshaped women’s self-image, reinforcing their sense of agency within both household and community.

Generational differences were particularly striking. Younger women appeared more willing to embrace tourism as a platform for leadership and self-expression. A university student assisting with a CBT project in Flores stated, “Tourism gives us a stage to show our ideas. Older women sometimes stay quiet, but we are ready to speak up.” This generational shift suggests the potential for CBT to act as a catalyst for broader cultural change, gradually expanding women’s roles in public life.

At the same time, empowerment was uneven and context-dependent. While some women reported increased confidence, others noted that their enhanced visibility occasionally led to criticism from neighbors who viewed their activities as challenging traditional norms. A participant from Lombok observed, “Some people say women who work too much outside forget their household duties. We must be careful not to be judged.” This tension demonstrates that psychological empowerment exists in negotiation with cultural expectations, producing both opportunity and risk.

Overall, the findings show that CBT provided important forms of social and psychological empowerment, enabling women to expand their skills, confidence, and community recognition. Yet this empowerment was fragile, often constrained by persistent gender ideologies and the risk of social backlash.

Negotiating Constraints and Agency

Although women's involvement in community-based tourism was shaped by entrenched gender norms, participants frequently described strategies of negotiation that enabled them to exercise agency within cultural boundaries. These negotiations often took subtle forms, balancing the pursuit of autonomy with the need to comply with social expectations. A homestay operator in Lombok explained, "My husband prefers that I do not attend many meetings, but I told him that tourists ask for me, so I must be there. Now he lets me go, but only if I finish the housework first." Her account illustrates how women carve out spaces of agency while continuing to respect domestic responsibilities.

Several women emphasized the importance of collective solidarity as a means of expanding their room for maneuver. In Flores, craftswomen organized informal cooperatives to share resources and discuss fair pricing for their products. One participant reflected, "When we work together, men take us more seriously. Alone, they may dismiss us, but as a group, our voice is stronger." Such examples reveal how collective action not only enhanced economic outcomes but also elevated women's social legitimacy in decision-making contexts.

Younger women, in particular, displayed more assertive strategies of negotiation, openly challenging traditional hierarchies. A university student assisting with CBT in Lombok remarked, "We respect our elders, but we also say that women can lead. Sometimes they laugh, but little by little, they listen." This generational perspective suggests that incremental change is occurring, with younger participants less willing to accept the rigid gender boundaries that constrain their mothers' and grandmothers' roles.

Nonetheless, women often framed their acts of negotiation in culturally acceptable terms, avoiding direct confrontation. A participant from Flores stated, "I do not fight with my husband about decisions. I just manage my earnings quietly and use them for our children. In this way, I contribute without causing conflict." This form of "quiet agency" underscores how women navigate empowerment in ways that are contextually strategic, ensuring that their actions are recognized while minimizing the risk of social backlash.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that women's experiences in CBT are characterized not only by constraints but also by the creative strategies they employ to expand autonomy within patriarchal structures. Agency in this context is not expressed through outright resistance but through everyday negotiations, collective solidarity, and intergenerational shifts. Such forms of negotiation highlight that empowerment and constraint are not mutually exclusive, but coexist as part of the lived reality of women in Indonesian community-based tourism.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that women's involvement in community-based tourism in Indonesia is characterized by both opportunities for empowerment and the persistence of structural constraints. Women in Lombok and Flores gained access to income, new skills, and social visibility, yet their roles remained shaped by gendered labor divisions, exclusion from leadership, and the ongoing burden of domestic responsibilities. These results highlight that CBT cannot be assumed to be gender-neutral; rather, it is embedded within cultural and social structures that influence how benefits and opportunities are distributed.

The first theme on economic empowerment confirms the argument that tourism can create pathways for women to strengthen their household position and improve family welfare (Ferguson, 2015; Scheyvens, 1999). Women's ability to contribute financially was often linked to greater confidence and subtle shifts in intra-household decision-making. However, the second theme underscores the persistence of gendered labor burdens, echoing Swain, (2005) observation that women's entry into tourism often reinforces rather than challenges domestic roles. The "double burden" of combining tourism work with household duties reveals that empowerment in economic terms does not automatically translate into broader gender equality.

The third theme, concerning limited leadership access, illustrates the structural barriers that prevent women from shaping the governance of CBT. Despite being central to tourism delivery, women were largely absent from decision-making structures, a pattern consistent with Blackstock (2005) critique that CBT initiatives often reproduce existing hierarchies. These findings resonate with Cole (2007) study in Flores, which showed that women's contributions were celebrated symbolically but sidelined in formal authority. The persistence of male-dominated leadership suggests that empowerment remains uneven and circumscribed.

At the same time, the fourth theme highlights important forms of social and psychological empowerment. By interacting with tourists and engaging in CBT activities, women developed new confidence, communication skills, and recognition within their communities. These outcomes align with (Maspul, 2023; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018) concept of inclusive tourism, which emphasizes not only economic but also social dimensions of empowerment. Yet, as the findings reveal, psychological empowerment was fragile, with some women facing criticism for transgressing traditional norms.

The fifth theme illustrates that women are not passive recipients of structural inequality but active negotiators of their roles. Through subtle strategies ranging from negotiating with husbands to forming cooperatives and exercising quiet financial autonomy, women expanded their agency within culturally acceptable boundaries. This supports Ferguson (2015) argument that empowerment in tourism often emerges through incremental and context-specific negotiations rather than radical transformations. The generational differences observed suggest that younger women may gradually reshape gender norms within CBT, creating potential for long-term change.

Taken together, the findings contribute to debates on gender and tourism by showing that CBT in Indonesia offers both empowerment and constraint. Economic and psychological gains coexist with structural inequalities, producing a paradox of empowerment within patriarchy. Theoretically, the study underscores the need to conceptualize empowerment as multi-dimensional, situated, and negotiated, rather than as a linear outcome of participation. Practically, the results suggest that CBT initiatives and policies must address gender relations explicitly, ensuring that women are not only participants but also leaders and decision-makers. Without such efforts, the transformative potential of CBT risks being limited to individual gains rather than structural change.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the gendered experiences of women in community-based tourism in Lombok and Flores, Indonesia, highlighting the opportunities and constraints that shaped their participation. The findings demonstrate that CBT provided important avenues for women's economic empowerment, allowing them to contribute income to household needs, support children's education, and develop small-scale entrepreneurial activities. Participation also fostered social and psychological empowerment, with women gaining confidence, new skills, and recognition within their communities. However, these benefits were consistently mediated by structural constraints, including the persistence of domestic responsibilities, the undervaluation of women's labor, and their exclusion from leadership and decision-making roles. The coexistence of empowerment and constraint illustrates that CBT is not a gender-neutral initiative, but one deeply embedded in patriarchal cultural norms.

The study's limitations include its focus on two sites, which may not capture the diversity of gender relations in CBT across Indonesia. Furthermore, the qualitative design provides depth of understanding but does not allow for broad generalization. Future research could adopt comparative or mixed-method approaches, incorporating additional destinations and quantitative measures of empowerment to strengthen the analysis.

Policy and practice implications are clear. CBT initiatives must go beyond celebrating women's participation in service roles to ensuring their inclusion in governance and decision-making structures. Training programs should address not only technical skills but also leadership development and gender sensitivity for both women and men. Efforts to support women's entrepreneurship should be complemented by strategies to reduce their double burden, such as childcare support or community labor-sharing arrangements. By addressing these issues, CBT can move closer to fulfilling its promise of equitable and transformative empowerment.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have nothing to disclose.

Data Availability

The data is available upon reasonable request.

Author Contribution

The authors of this study contributed equally.

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