

**Comment by Jennifer Seif to this year's theme of World Tourism Day:
"Tourism Opens Doors for Women".**

Tourism is the world's largest industry, contributing just over 10 per cent of Global Domestic Product and employing some 234 million people, or 8.7 per cent of the global workforce. In 2006 the global travel and tourism industry recorded its highest ever levels of activity (842 million international arrivals), and according to the United Nations World Tourism organization (UN-WTO) growth trends are expected to continue well into the future, with international arrivals projected to reach a massive 1.6 billion by 2020. Tourism is a top export industry in about one-third of the world's 50 least developed countries, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) estimates that international tourism receipts for developing countries will soon pass the US\$ 250 billion mark (the global total was US\$ 735 in 2006).

According to the UN-WTO, the travel and tourism industry's propensity for continued growth and its rapid expansion within developing countries conveys countless opportunities to women, in particular the nearly one billion women living in poverty globally. Tourism is widely seen as a sector especially well-suited to poverty reduction, based on the labour intensive nature of the industry and other factors, including its strong dependence on natural and cultural assets (which are assets that poor people including women typically have access to); the diversity of the industry, which facilitates wide participation including the participation of women and youth; and the necessary proximity of the customer to the producer, which creates opportunities for formal and informal linkages, e.g. souvenir-selling, tour-guiding, beer-brewing, hair-dressing, and so forth.

These "pro poor" characteristics have led many governments and development agencies to posit tourism as a major poverty reduction vehicle. The link between tourism and poverty reduction is most usually conceived within a neo-liberal approach to economic development, resulting in calls for "open markets" (i.e. to stimulate international investment) and "open skies" (i.e. to liberalize air travel) as pre-requisites for growing tourism arrivals, receipts, market share and other indicators of success. The neo-liberal argument is that market expansion eventually "opens doors" for poor people by providing them with employment and entrepreneurial opportunities spurred by tourism growth and investment.

There are however other ways of thinking about the relationship between tourism and poverty reduction. The concept of "responsible tourism" is especially good to think with, and provides a useful counter-point to the neo-liberal emphasis on the market. Responsible tourism is based on the triple bottom line of sustainable development, and is premised on the need to strike a balance (at both firm and destination levels) between the economic, social and environmental dimensions of tourism. Responsible tourism is also concerned to balance the positive and negative impacts of tourism, with a view to assuring "net benefits" for local

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destination stakeholders, particularly women and other structurally disadvantaged groups. Finally, responsible tourism stresses that individual businesses, big or small, can capture net benefits for staff, communities and the environment, by taking specific operational measures and implementing appropriate projects within and beyond the workplace

A responsible tourism response to the notion that “tourism opens doors for women” would thus interrogate the quality of the opportunities on offer, and also consider whether the benefits associated with tourism growth outweigh the economic, social and environmental costs of its development: what doors are being opened for whom, and at what cost?

In economic terms, women hold a wide variety of jobs in the travel and tourism sector, both globally and in South Africa. The UN-WTO notes that women now hold “as many jobs as men” in travel and tourism, and that in many African countries women occupy high ranking positions in the tourism public and private sectors, which is undoubtedly the case in South Africa. However the vast majority of women working in the sector do so as cleaners, scullery workers, chamber maids, waitrons, telephone operators, and the like – primarily under conditions of low pay, long hours, unpaid overtime, poor health and safety conditions and even sexual harassment. The seasonal nature of the industry means that many hotels, resorts and tour companies employing high numbers of casual workers (often predominantly women) who often miss out on basic employment benefits like unemployment insurance. Millions more women are surviving in the informal sector: selling craft, food, drink and other goods and services to foreign and domestic tourists and people working in the sector.

There is clearly a need to create secure, quality employment for women in tourism, under conditions of equal pay and fair treatment. Such an approach would in time ensure that tourism opens quality doors for women, at all levels. In post-apartheid South Africa there is a further need to advance black women within the tourism sector: research commissioned by the Tourism Charter Council found that black women are seriously under represented at middle and top management levels and within specific sub sectors like safari guiding and tour guiding.

Socially, tourism is a powerful force. There is a diverse and growing literature that points to the potential for tourism to foster peace (“peace through tourism” and “peace parks”); conservation (“eco tourism”); and social justice for marginalized groups (“justice tourism”). The UN-WTO maintains that as more and more women are employed in the tourism economy, the role and status of women in society will eventually be strengthened, which in turn is supportive of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other poverty reduction targets. Obviously this will only occur if the status and rights of women within the workplace are affirmed and protected, and if robust policies and appropriate policy instruments to foster gender equality are enacted and enforced. South Africa has made huge gains in this regard

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over the past decade or so, even if implementation of employment equity legislation remains a challenge and despite recent calls to de-emphasize the need to affirm white women within the national economy.

Beyond the workplace, tourism growth and development, especially rapid development, can weaken social institutions and engender new/expanded forms of socio-economic inequality – often to the detriment of women. Around the world, tourism “open doors” to sex work and to the commercial sexual exploitation of women and children, a global problem that is becoming more prominent in Africa and will only flourish as tourism arrivals to the continent grow alongside persistent poverty and inequality.

From an environmental standpoint, resorts, hotels, golf courses and the like often divert land, water, energy and access to biodiversity away from poor communities, creating even more work for the rural and peri-urban women and young girls tasked with supplying water and fuel for household use. Fulfilling basic household needs competes with schooling in many poor communities, which works against the MDGs. In theory, the construction of tourism infrastructure should generate spin-offs for local residents in the form of new/expanded bulk infrastructure, improved transportation and telecommunications networks, improved health services, better policing, etc. These benefits are however often beyond the reach of the very poor, who may actually be worse off if the march of tourism denies them access to productive land, biodiversity and other resources upon which their livelihood strategies rest.

So does tourism open doors for women in Africa – or close them? It rather depends on the context and on what other livelihood options are in play. Women who are employed in a new hotel development may be better off in cash terms, but if that same hotel degrades the environment and attracts sexual offenders, those gains would be eroded – and tourism as a poverty reduction strategy would have failed. Tourism is a complex sector, requiring a fairly sophisticated level of analysis that moves beyond the notion that tourism growth, *per se*, is good for women and good for the poor.

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