



## BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM EVIDENCE FROM EASTERN INDONESIA

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### ABSTRACT

Tourism is widely recognized as a sector with the potential to promote inclusive and sustainable development, yet women's participation often remains limited by structural and cultural barriers. The purpose of this article is to analyze the barriers faced by women entrepreneurs in sustainable tourism and to consider how addressing these challenges can advance women's economic empowerment in the eastern part of Indonesia. The specific research aim is to identify and prioritize the most critical constraints through the integration of multiple stakeholder perspectives. The study applied a hybrid methodological design combining the Delphi technique, the Q-sort method and thematic analysis. Data were collected from experts, policymakers, community leaders and women entrepreneurs between January and June 2025. The findings reveal that women face interlocking barriers: restricted access to finance and credit, socio-cultural norms limiting mobility and leadership, weak institutional frameworks, and insufficient training and digital literacy. These constraints are compounded by poor infrastructure and limited market access in remote areas. The study contributes to scholarship by applying a multi-method approach and situating women's empowerment within the underexplored context of Eastern Indonesia. Policy recommendations include gender-sensitive financial inclusion, accessible capacity-building initiatives, and strengthened women's cooperatives to foster agency and leadership in tourism.

### KEYWORDS

Delphi method, Q-sort, thematic analysis, sustainable tourism, women's empowerment

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has emerged as a major driver of economic development, social transformation and cultural exchange across the globe. In recent years, sustainable tourism has gained increasing attention for its ability to balance economic growth with environmental preservation and social inclusion (Ahmadi Zahrani et al., 2025). Sustainable tourism does not only preserve natural and cultural resources but also creates opportunities for equitable participation of marginalized groups, particularly women, in local economies (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2024). Women's active involvement in tourism-related businesses contributes to household well-being, cultural heritage preservation and broader community resilience, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on gender equality and decent work.

In Indonesia, tourism is widely recognized as a strategic sector (Yuli, 2024), yet women entrepreneurs face persistent structural and cultural barriers that limit their ability to benefit fully from tourism development. While women in regions such as Bali and Java have received considerable scholarly and policy attention, the situation in the eastern part of Indonesia remains underexplored. This region, encompassing provinces such as Maluku, Papua, North Maluku, Southeast Sulawesi and East Nusa Tenggara, is marked by geographic isolation, limited infrastructure and enduring poverty rates that are higher than the national average (Pandina & Barika, 2023). Deeply rooted gender norms continue to confine women to caregiving and household roles, restricting their leadership opportunities and economic independence (Bayo, 2021). At the same time, the eastern region holds immense potential for sustainable tourism, with its distinctive landscapes, cultural richness and biodiversity. Ensuring that women can participate equally in this development process is therefore both a social justice imperative and an economic necessity.

Despite this potential, academic literature on women in sustainable tourism has been disproportionately focused on more established destinations. Research in the Indonesian context has tended to concentrate on Bali, Lombok or urban centers, where women's access to capital, education and markets is relatively more advanced (Candra et al., 2023; El Badriati et al., 2022). In contrast, the challenges and opportunities facing women in the eastern provinces have been insufficiently documented, leaving policymakers and practitioners with limited evidence to guide interventions. Furthermore, many previous studies have employed single-method qualitative approaches, which often fail to capture the complexity of intersecting barriers related to finance, social norms and institutional support (Trisanti et al., 2022). This

imbalance highlights a critical research gap that this study seeks to address.

The aim of this article is to present the barriers and challenges faced by women who run tourism enterprises in the eastern part of Indonesia and to explore how these barriers can be addressed to strengthen women's economic empowerment in sustainable tourism. The specific research aim is to identify and prioritize the most pressing barriers to women's empowerment by integrating multiple perspectives from experts, entrepreneurs, community leaders and policymakers. In pursuing this objective, the study asks three guiding questions: What are the most critical barriers experienced by women in tourism businesses across the eastern provinces of Indonesia? How do different stakeholders perceive and prioritize these barriers? And to what extent can participatory, multi-method approaches generate practical and context-sensitive recommendations for advancing women's empowerment in sustainable tourism?

By framing Eastern Indonesia as the locus of inquiry, this study contributes to correcting a regional imbalance in the literature while advancing a more comprehensive understanding of gender and tourism in developing contexts. It combines expert consensus, stakeholder experiences and thematic insights to provide both analytical depth and practical recommendations. The findings are expected to inform tourism policy and gender empowerment initiatives not only in Eastern Indonesia but also in comparable peripheral regions across the Global South where women's economic participation in tourism remains constrained.

To establish a robust theoretical and contextual foundation, the study also employed a narrative literature review. This approach enabled a descriptive and interpretive synthesis of previous studies, allowing the integration of diverse and interdisciplinary sources (Juntunen & Lehenkari, 2021; Popik-Mazur, 2025).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Sustainable tourism has been widely discussed as both a theoretical framework and a policy agenda that seeks to reconcile tourism development with long-term ecological, social and economic sustainability. The World Tourism Organization defines sustainable tourism as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities" (Global Sustainable Tourism Council, n.d.). This definition

underscores that tourism cannot be viewed solely as an economic activity but must also be embedded within broader sustainability concerns that account for equity, resilience and intergenerational responsibility. Earlier contributions by Bramwell and Lane (2011) similarly emphasized that sustainable tourism requires a holistic approach, one that avoids prioritizing economic outcomes at the expense of environmental conservation or social justice.

Central to the concept of sustainable tourism is the principle of balance across three interrelated dimensions: economic viability, socio-cultural integrity and environmental protection (Nguyen, 2023). Economically, tourism is expected to provide stable livelihoods, generate income while contributing to local and national development. Socially and culturally, it must respect and preserve traditions, strengthen community cohesion and promote inclusivity. Environmentally, it should minimize negative impacts on ecosystems and biodiversity while fostering conservation initiatives. The interdependence of these dimensions means that neglecting one will undermine the others, leading to development pathways that may be profitable in the short term but unsustainable in the long run.

Within this framework, gender equality has been increasingly recognized as a critical dimension of sustainability. Tourism provides unique opportunities for women to participate in entrepreneurship, leadership and cultural preservation, yet structural inequalities frequently constrain their potential. Figueroa-Domecq et al. (2024) argue that women's empowerment is not only an ethical imperative but also a practical requirement for ensuring the sustainability of tourism. Empowered women contribute to more resilient communities, more equitable decision-making processes, and more inclusive economic outcomes. Conversely, the exclusion of women reinforces cycles of poverty, inequality and social disempowerment that undermine the goals of sustainable development.

The integration of gender considerations into sustainable tourism aligns directly with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: SDG 5 emphasizes the need to eliminate barriers that prevent women from achieving full participation in economic and social life, while SDG 8 promotes inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work for all (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Tourism, as one of the fastest-growing global industries, is uniquely positioned to advance both goals simultaneously by creating employment, supporting entrepreneurship, and enhancing women's economic participation (World Tourism Organization, 2019). As such, sustainable tourism should be conceptualized not only in terms of environmental protection and economic performance but also in relation to gender equity and social inclusion within host communities.

## 2.2. WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN TOURISM: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

Tourism has been described as one of the few global industries with the potential to offer women substantial opportunities for entrepreneurship, employment and leadership (Hussain et al., 2024). Across diverse contexts, women play pivotal roles in managing guesthouses, producing handicrafts, operating food businesses and preserving cultural heritage. These contributions extend beyond economic outcomes, as they often reinforce social cohesion and strengthen community identity (Spagano, 2025). However, despite their active involvement, women in tourism frequently remain marginalized in decision-making processes and disproportionately occupy low-paid or informal roles, reflecting broader structural gender inequalities (Gentry, 2007).

Globally, several recurring barriers have been identified that constrain women's full participation in tourism. One of the most prominent is financial exclusion. Studies across Africa, Asia and Latin America demonstrate that women often struggle to access credit, loans or other forms of investment due to discriminatory lending practices and gendered biases within financial systems (de Andrés et al., 2021). Another common barrier is the persistence of cultural and social norms that limit women's mobility, confine them to household responsibilities, or restrict their roles to low-status occupations within tourism enterprises (Babb, 2012; Kumar, 2023). These cultural expectations not only constrain women's economic opportunities but also reinforce patterns of invisibility in official statistics and policy frameworks.

Regional studies illustrate both shared challenges and context-specific barriers. In Bangladesh, for example, research highlights how women's participation in community-based tourism initiatives is often limited to informal or unpaid roles, despite their significant contribution to cultural and ecological stewardship (Sami, 2024). In Iran, women's involvement in tourism is often curtailed by restrictions on mobility and patriarchal norms that prioritize male ownership of businesses and resources (Seyfi et al., 2025). In China, indigenous women face compounded challenges, as tourism development frequently intersects with issues of ethnic identity, land rights and cultural commodification (Dam et al., 2025). Despite these differences, a common thread is the under-recognition of women's economic and social contributions to tourism development.

The literature also demonstrates that participatory and capacity-building approaches can play a crucial role in addressing these barriers. Interventions that integrate training programs, access to microfinance and cooperative business models have shown positive

outcomes in enabling women to move from peripheral to central roles in tourism development (Scheyvens, 2014). Moreover, participatory methods that include women in decision-making processes have been found to enhance the legitimacy and sustainability of tourism initiatives, ensuring that women's voices shape both policy and practice (Figuroa-Domecq et al., 2024). These global insights reinforce the view that empowering women in tourism is not merely a matter of social justice but also a practical requirement for the sustainability and resilience of tourism systems.

Taken together, global studies illustrate that while women's roles in tourism are significant, their empowerment remains constrained by structural, cultural and institutional barriers. This recognition provides a comparative lens for analyzing the situation in Indonesia, particularly in the eastern provinces where similar challenges of financial exclusion, cultural norms and limited institutional support are prevalent, but where the evidence base remains comparatively sparse.

### 2.3. WOMEN IN TOURISM IN INDONESIA

Indonesia has positioned tourism as one of its priority sectors for economic diversification, cultural diplomacy and regional development. Women have historically played a significant role in this industry, particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) such as homestays, culinary ventures, handicrafts and cultural performances. Their contribution is critical to sustaining community-based tourism initiatives, enhancing visitor experiences, and ensuring that tourism reflects local cultural identities (El Badriati et al., 2022). Nationally, studies have documented how women's involvement in tourism contributes to household income, supports children's education and enhances family resilience, thereby extending the benefits of tourism beyond individual businesses (Candra et al., 2023).

Despite these contributions, Indonesian women in tourism face persistent constraints related to limited access to credit, unequal participation in decision-making and entrenched gender norms that prioritize their domestic responsibilities (Adnyani, 2023). These barriers are not evenly distributed across the country but are shaped by regional socio-economic contexts. Research has disproportionately concentrated on Bali, Lombok and Java, destinations with relatively developed infrastructure, market access and global visibility (Candra et al., 2023). These areas often provide women with more opportunities for formal sector participation, tourism-related education and exposure to international networks. By contrast, peripheral and rural regions remain understudied,

leaving a significant gap in the understanding of how women navigate tourism entrepreneurship in more disadvantaged contexts.

The eastern part of Indonesia which includes provinces such as Maluku, Papua, North Maluku, Southeast Sulawesi and East Nusa Tenggara offers a contrasting picture. This region is characterized by high poverty rates, geographic isolation and weaker infrastructure compared to the western provinces (Kurniawan & Gunawan, 2025; Pandina & Barika, 2023). For women entrepreneurs in these provinces, barriers extend beyond financial exclusion to encompass socio-cultural constraints that limit their mobility and entrepreneurial autonomy. For instance, patriarchal norms often position women as secondary income earners, making it difficult for them to access credit or leadership roles within community tourism cooperatives (Bayo, 2021; Miranti et al., 2022). Moreover, weak institutional support and limited capacity-building initiatives exacerbate these challenges, leaving women in Eastern Indonesia particularly vulnerable to exclusion from the benefits of tourism development.

At the same time, Eastern Indonesia holds immense potential for sustainable tourism due to its rich biodiversity, cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge systems. From Timor's spice tourism heritage to Papua's eco-cultural tourism, women are integral custodians of cultural traditions and environmental practices that are central to the region's tourism appeal (Manggaprouw et al., 2025; Utama Dewayani, 2024). Yet, these contributions often remain invisible within official tourism planning frameworks. Studies in agriculture and fisheries suggest that women in Eastern Indonesia exhibit resilience and adaptability in the face of structural barriers, but their participation in tourism has not been systematically documented (Husni, 2024). This absence of empirical evidence underscores the urgency of research that not only identifies the barriers but also amplifies women's voices and explores strategies for empowerment in tourism-specific contexts.

By examining women's empowerment in the eastern provinces of Indonesia, this article addresses two important gaps. First, it expands the scope of Indonesian tourism research beyond the dominant western regions to shed light on marginalized geographies. Second, it situates women's empowerment within a broader framework of sustainable tourism, demonstrating how gender equality and inclusivity are essential for unlocking the developmental potential of peripheral regions. In doing so, it contributes to both national debates on tourism and gender and to international discussions on the intersection of sustainability and women's empowerment in the Global South.

### 3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a hybrid methodological design that integrates the Delphi technique, the Q-sort method, and thematic analysis to identify and prioritize barriers to women's empowerment in sustainable tourism in the eastern part of Indonesia. The study was conducted between January and June 2025, involving experts, policymakers, community leaders and women entrepreneurs across provinces such as Maluku, Papua, North Maluku, Southeast Sulawesi and East Nusa Tenggara. The multi-method approach was selected to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the barriers, while also facilitating stakeholder participation in generating context-sensitive insights.

The Delphi method was first used to solicit expert opinions and reach consensus on the key barriers

facing women in tourism enterprises. This iterative process allowed experts to refine their views through successive rounds of feedback. Following this, the Q-sort technique was applied to rank and prioritize the identified barriers according to their perceived importance. Finally, thematic analysis was conducted to examine qualitative insights, ensuring that the voices of women entrepreneurs and community stakeholders were integrated into the findings.

Participants were purposively selected based on their expertise in tourism, gender and community development. Efforts were made to include a diverse range of actors from government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academia, community organizations and international development bodies. This ensured a multi-stakeholder perspective that reflects both policy-level and grassroots experiences of women in tourism (see Table 1).

Table 1. Expert details

Expert ID	Position/role	Experience (years)	Area of expertise	Affiliation
1	Senior tourism officer	15	Women's empowerment, community-based tourism	Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, Indonesia
2	Gender equality specialist	12	Gender policy, women in tourism	UN Women Indonesia
3	University lecturer	9	Sustainable tourism, capacity-building	Pattimura University, Maluku
4	Non-governmental organization (NGO) program director	18	Community development, microfinance	Local NGO (Gender Equity and Development), Papua
5	Senior policy analyst	20	Policy reform, women's rights	National Development Planning Agency (Bappenas)
6	Community leader	25	Community-based tourism, women's leadership	Women's Cooperative, Maluku
7	Tourism consultant	14	Private sector development, SME support	Independent Consultant (Eastern Indonesia Focus)
8	Researcher/academic	10	Women's economic empowerment, policy research	Research Institute for Tourism Studies, Sulawesi
9	Regional tourism director	17	Destination management, women in leadership	Provincial Tourism Office, Papua
10	Development specialist	22	Sustainable development, gender equity	International Development Agency (IDA)
11	Social entrepreneur	11	Women-led businesses, social enterprise	Founder of Tourism Social Enterprise, Maluku
12	Advocacy specialist	13	Gender advocacy, legal rights	Women's Legal Aid NGO, Eastern Indonesia
13	Cooperative leader	19	Women's cooperatives, small business	Cooperative Network for Women's Enterprises, Sulawesi Tenggara
14	International consultant	16	Tourism policy, gender-sensitive planning	International Consultant (Asia-Pacific)
15	Local tourism expert	21	Local economic development, gender inclusion	Regional Government (Tourism Office, North Maluku)

Source: authors.

Three rounds of Delphi surveys were administered electronically to the expert panel, with response rates above 85% across all rounds. The Q-sort exercise was conducted in facilitated workshops, where participants sorted and ranked the barriers according to priority. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions with women entrepreneurs and community members complemented these methods, generating qualitative data that were later thematically analyzed.

Quantitative rankings from the Q-sort were analyzed using descriptive statistics to establish consensus on priority barriers. Qualitative data were coded inductively, allowing themes related to financial exclusion, socio-cultural constraints and institutional support to emerge organically. This triangulation of methods enhanced the robustness of findings, addressing both the structural and lived dimensions of women's empowerment in sustainable tourism.

## 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. DELPHI FINDINGS: CONSENSUS ON KEY BARRIERS

The Delphi process generated a high level of consensus among the expert panel regarding the main barriers to women's empowerment in sustainable tourism in the eastern part of Indonesia. Across three iterative rounds, participants consistently highlighted financial, socio-cultural and institutional constraints as the most critical obstacles. The final ranking of barriers is presented in Table 2.

Limited access to finance and credit emerged as the top-ranked barrier, with an average score of 4.8 and agreement from 92% of experts. Participants emphasized that women entrepreneurs in Eastern Indonesia continue to face systemic discrimination in lending practices, coupled with limited collateral ownership and inadequate access to microfinance schemes. As a senior tourism official noted, women entrepreneurs in tourism frequently encounter credit exclusion because formal land ownership is required as collateral, despite their businesses being economically viable (Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, Indonesia, personal communication, January 14, 2025).

The second-ranked barrier was socio-cultural norms that restrict women's mobility and leadership roles (average rank: 4.6; 89% agreement). Experts and community leaders underscored that patriarchal expectations frequently relegate women to domestic responsibilities, thereby constraining their ability to engage in business development or participate in decision-making structures. This finding resonates with regional literature that identifies cultural traditions as persistent obstacles to gender equality in peripheral areas of Indonesia (Bayo, 2021).

Lack of capacity-building and vocational training opportunities was the third most significant barrier (average rank: 4.5; 87% agreement). Experts agreed that while women demonstrate strong entrepreneurial motivation, they often lack the skills necessary for business expansion, digital marketing, and product innovation. Participants stressed the absence of targeted training programs in rural and remote areas of the

Table 2. Top-ranked barriers identified in the Delphi study

Rank	Barrier	Average rank (1–5)	Agreement among experts (%)	Notes (from Delphi rounds)
1	Limited access to finance and credit for women entrepreneurs	4.8	92	Consistently ranked highest; financial institutions perceived as discriminatory
2	Strong socio-cultural norms restricting women's mobility and leadership	4.6	89	Patriarchal norms reinforce women's domestic roles, limiting participation
3	Lack of capacity-building and vocational training opportunities	4.5	87	Absence of targeted tourism skills training for women, especially in rural areas
4	Weak institutional support and fragmented policy frameworks	4.4	85	Inconsistent government support; policies often not gender-sensitive
5	Limited market access and poor infrastructure in remote areas	4.3	82	Geographic isolation reduces competitiveness of women-led enterprises
6	Digital divide: limited digital literacy and access to technology	4.1	78	Women face challenges adopting digital platforms for marketing and networking
7	Low representation of women in decision-making structures	3.9	74	Women underrepresented in cooperatives, associations, and policy forums

Source: authors.

eastern provinces, leaving many women without the competencies required to compete in the tourism sector.

The Delphi panel also identified weak institutional support and fragmented policy frameworks as a major obstacle (average rank: 4.4; 85% agreement). According to a senior policy analyst, tourism development policies in Indonesia rarely incorporate explicit gender sensitive measures, and existing initiatives remain fragmented across ministries with limited interagency coordination (National Development Planning Agency, Indonesia, personal communication, January 15 2025). Similarly, poor infrastructure and limited market access were ranked fifth (average rank: 4.3; 82% agreement), reflecting the geographic isolation of many communities and the logistical challenges women face in reaching larger markets.

Lower-ranked but still significant barriers included the digital divide (average rank: 4.1; 78% agreement) and women's underrepresentation in decision-making structures (average rank: 3.9; 74% agreement). These issues highlight both technological exclusion and institutional gaps that further limit women's empowerment in the tourism sector.

Overall, the Delphi results suggest that women in the eastern part of Indonesia face interlocking barriers that span financial, socio-cultural and institutional domains. While financial access remains the most urgent challenge, socio-cultural norms and weak institutional frameworks create additional layers of exclusion that undermine the potential of women-led tourism enterprises. These findings provide a foundation for further prioritization through the Q-sort exercise and deeper exploration through thematic analysis.

#### 4.2. Q-SORT FINDINGS: PRIORITIZATION OF BARRIERS

The Q-sort exercise provided a more fine-grained understanding of how different stakeholder groups prioritize the barriers faced by women in sustainable tourism in the eastern part of Indonesia. While the

Delphi method identified a broad consensus on the most critical issues, the Q-sort revealed areas of convergence and divergence between experts, policymakers and women entrepreneurs (see Table 3).

Across all groups, limited access to finance and credit consistently emerged as the most urgent challenge. Experts and women entrepreneurs ranked this barrier first, while policymakers placed it second. Women entrepreneurs emphasized that without adequate capital, they cannot expand their businesses or access new markets, a finding that confirms earlier studies on the financial exclusion of women entrepreneurs in developing economies (de Andrés et al., 2021). Experts noted that discriminatory lending practices and lack of collateral remain persistent issues, echoing the findings of the Delphi phase.

Socio-cultural norms restricting women's mobility and leadership were also consistently prioritized, ranking second overall. Women entrepreneurs and experts agreed on its central importance, while policymakers ranked it third. The divergence suggests that policymakers may underestimate the depth of cultural constraints compared to those who experience or directly observe them. This gap underscores the need for gender-sensitive policymaking that acknowledges the lived realities of women in rural communities (Bayo, 2021).

The third area of convergence was the lack of capacity-building and vocational training opportunities. Interestingly, policymakers ranked this barrier as the highest priority, whereas experts and women entrepreneurs placed it third. This indicates that policymakers perceive training interventions as a primary entry point for empowerment, while practitioners and women themselves see training as necessary but not sufficient without improved financial access and cultural change.

Other barriers, such as weak institutional support, limited market access, and poor infrastructure, occupied mid-level rankings across all groups. Policymakers

Table 3. Q-sort prioritization of barriers by stakeholder group

Barrier	Experts (mean rank)	Policymakers (mean rank)	Women entrepreneurs (mean rank)	Overall rank
Limited access to finance and credit	1	2	1	1
Socio-cultural norms restricting women's mobility/leadership	2	3	2	2
Lack of capacity-building and vocational training	3	1	3	3
Weak institutional support and fragmented policies	4	4	5	4
Limited market access and poor infrastructure	5	5	4	5
Digital divide: limited literacy and access to technology	6	6	6	6
Low representation of women in decision-making structures	7	7	7	7

Source: authors.

and experts converged in ranking institutional weaknesses fourth, while women entrepreneurs gave it slightly lower importance (fifth). This suggests that structural governance issues, while acknowledged, may appear less pressing to entrepreneurs who face immediate constraints of finance and mobility. Similarly, limited market access and infrastructure challenges were seen as significant but secondary to socio-cultural and financial barriers.

Lower-ranked barriers included the digital divide and women's underrepresentation in decision-making structures. All three groups placed these consistently at the bottom of their rankings, suggesting that while important, they are perceived as longer-term issues compared to immediate economic and cultural barriers. However, experts cautioned that neglecting these dimensions could undermine future opportunities for women, especially as digital platforms increasingly shape market access and as representation in cooperatives and associations remains crucial for institutional change.

Overall, the Q-sort findings highlight that while there is broad consensus on the primacy of financial access and socio-cultural barriers, stakeholders differ in the weight they assign to training, governance and infrastructure issues. These differences underscore the value of participatory approaches that incorporate diverse perspectives. By integrating the views of experts, policymakers and women entrepreneurs, the study ensures that subsequent recommendations are both contextually grounded and responsive to multiple levels of stakeholder concern.

#### 4.3. THEMATIC ANALYSIS: INSIGHTS FROM STAKEHOLDERS

Thematic analysis of interviews and focus group discussions with women entrepreneurs, community leaders and local stakeholders provided deeper insights into the lived experiences behind the barriers identified in the Delphi and Q-sort phases. Three major clusters of barriers emerged from the qualitative data: financial and institutional constraints, socio-cultural norms, and capacity and skills limitations.

##### Financial and institutional barriers

Participants consistently emphasized that lack of access to credit and weak institutional support are the most immediate obstacles to women's empowerment in tourism. Women entrepreneurs reported difficulties in obtaining loans due to the absence of collateral, such as land titles, which are typically registered under male family members. One participant explained, *Even if I want to expand my homestay, the bank asks for land certificates, but the land is in my husband's name. I cannot apply on my own.* This reflects structural financial exclusion rooted in both legal frameworks and gender norms.

Institutional barriers were also evident in fragmented and inconsistent policies. Several community leaders observed that government tourism programs are rarely designed with gender sensitivity in mind, often overlooking women's specific needs. A policy officer remarked, *Programs come and go depending on the budget cycle, but there is no continuity, and women are rarely consulted in the design.* These gaps in institutional support exacerbate women's vulnerability and reinforce dependence on informal networks of credit and support.

##### Socio-cultural barriers

The influence of deeply entrenched gender norms emerged as a pervasive theme. Across provinces, participants reported that women's mobility and decision-making authority remain constrained by patriarchal expectations. As one community leader put it, *In our culture, women are expected to stay at home, take care of children, and support their husbands. Running a tourism business is seen as secondary, even if it helps the family.*

These cultural norms not only limit women's ability to manage and expand their businesses but also restrict their participation in leadership roles within cooperatives and tourism associations. Several participants described instances where women's proposals were disregarded in community meetings, reinforcing their marginalization in collective decision-making. The persistence of these norms underscores the importance of shifting community perceptions alongside economic interventions.

##### Capacity and skills barriers

A third set of barriers centered on limited access to training and digital literacy. While women expressed strong motivation to improve their businesses, they noted that training programs are often unavailable or inaccessible due to distance, cost, or scheduling conflicts with household responsibilities. One entrepreneur shared, *There was a training on digital marketing in the city, but I could not attend because I had no one to look after my children. Opportunities pass us by for these reasons.*

The digital divide was highlighted as a critical issue, with many women lacking the skills or resources to use online platforms for marketing and networking. Participants acknowledged that younger women are more adept at using smartphones and social media, but older entrepreneurs often struggle to adapt to digital technologies. This generational divide suggests that interventions should be tailored to different age groups to maximize their impact.

The thematic analysis reveals that barriers to women's empowerment in tourism are multi-dimensional and interlocking. Financial exclusion and weak institutional support limit women's capacity to grow their businesses, while socio-cultural norms restrict their autonomy and leadership opportunities. At the same time,

inadequate training and digital skills hinder their ability to adapt to the changing demands of the tourism industry. These findings underscore the necessity of holistic approaches that address economic, cultural, and institutional factors simultaneously, rather than in isolation.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that barriers to women's empowerment in tourism in the eastern part of Indonesia are multi-dimensional and mutually reinforcing, spanning economic, cultural and institutional domains. Limited access to finance emerged as the most pressing challenge, with women entrepreneurs unable to expand their businesses due to collateral requirements and discriminatory lending practices. This financial exclusion, compounded by weak institutional support, restricts women's autonomy and hinders their participation in tourism enterprises. At the same time, entrenched socio-cultural norms continue to confine women to domestic roles, limiting their mobility and excluding them from leadership and decision-making positions. Capacity gaps, particularly in vocational training and digital literacy, further exacerbate these challenges, as many women lack opportunities to build the skills necessary to compete in an increasingly digitalized tourism economy. These interlocking barriers illustrate that sustainable tourism cannot be achieved without simultaneously addressing the economic, cultural and institutional constraints that women face. If women remain marginalized in tourism development, the sector's potential to foster inclusive growth and community resilience will be significantly undermined. The results therefore underscore the importance of integrating gender equality into sustainable tourism, directly contributing to the realization of SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth.

This study also offers important contributions to the literature. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of combining Delphi, Q-sort and thematic analysis, providing a triangulated understanding that moves beyond the single-method approaches common in prior research. Empirically, it shifts the focus to Eastern Indonesia, a region underrepresented in tourism and gender studies. Much of the existing literature on women in Indonesian tourism concentrates on Bali, Lombok or Java, where access to markets and infrastructure is relatively advanced. By situating the inquiry in the eastern provinces, this study highlights both the universality of certain barriers, such as financial exclusion, and the distinctiveness of local cultural dynamics that shape women's empowerment in

peripheral contexts. In this way, it not only contributes to national debates on gender and tourism but also engages with global discussions on inclusivity and sustainability in the Global South (Chambers, 2022).

The findings resonate with international scholarship while extending it in context-specific ways. Financial exclusion mirrors the challenges identified by de Andrés et al. (2021) in developing economies and by Asiseh et al. (2025) in Sub-Saharan Africa, where women struggle to access formal credit. Socio-cultural constraints are comparable to those observed in South Asia, where patriarchal norms limit women's mobility and participation in economic life (Kumar, 2023). At the same time, the Indonesian context adds unique nuances, as highlighted by Bayo (2021), where customary practices and household expectations reinforce women's marginalization in decision-making. The lack of training and digital skills parallels the concerns raised by Scheyvens (2014), who emphasized that capacity-building is a prerequisite for women's meaningful involvement in peripheral destinations. Thus, the study confirms global patterns while contributing new insights into how these dynamics unfold in Eastern Indonesia.

From a practical standpoint, the study highlights several pathways for intervention. Governments should prioritize gender-sensitive financial inclusion programs (Kumari et al., 2025), such as microcredit schemes that do not require land titles as collateral, and integrate gender equality into tourism policies to ensure coordinated and sustainable support. NGOs and international agencies can strengthen capacity-building by designing accessible, locally relevant training initiatives, while also promoting women's leadership through targeted programs. Community cooperatives and women's associations have a vital role in fostering peer networks that enable women to share resources, strengthen bargaining power, and overcome socio-cultural barriers. By implementing such measures, tourism in Eastern Indonesia can evolve into a sector that not only generates economic returns but also advances gender equity, social inclusion and sustainable development (Dwipayanti et al., 2022).

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the barriers faced by women entrepreneurs in sustainable tourism in the eastern part of Indonesia, guided by the questions of what obstacles are most critical, how they are perceived by different stakeholders, and to what extent participatory and multi-method approaches can generate practical recommendations. Using a hybrid methodology that combined Delphi, Q-sort and thematic analysis, the

study identified finance, socio-cultural norms, weak institutional support and limited capacity-building as the most pressing challenges constraining women's empowerment in the tourism sector.

The findings make several academic contributions. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of triangulating expert consensus, stakeholder prioritization and qualitative insights to capture the complexity of women's empowerment. Empirically, it shifts the focus of Indonesian tourism scholarship toward Eastern Indonesia, a region underrepresented in existing literature yet rich in potential for sustainable tourism development. The study contributes to broader academic debates by situating gender empowerment as a central pillar of sustainable tourism, showing that inclusivity and equity are essential alongside economic and environmental objectives.

From a practical perspective, the findings point to the need for targeted interventions at multiple levels. Governments should design gender-sensitive financial inclusion policies and ensure that tourism development programs explicitly incorporate gender equality. NGOs and international agencies can strengthen women's skills and leadership capacity through accessible and tailored training initiatives. Community-based organizations and cooperatives should foster peer support and collective action to help women overcome socio-cultural barriers and strengthen their market position.

Nevertheless, the study has limitations that must be acknowledged. The data were collected from selected provinces within Eastern Indonesia, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions. The focus on small and medium-sized enterprises also excludes larger tourism actors who may face different challenges. Future research could expand the geographic scope, employ longitudinal designs to capture change over time, and explore how digital technologies may open new opportunities for women in tourism.

In sum, this study underscores that empowering women is not only a matter of social equity but also a prerequisite for the sustainability of tourism in Eastern Indonesia. By illuminating the interplay of financial, socio-cultural and institutional barriers, and by proposing practical solutions, it provides both scholarly insight and actionable guidance for advancing gender-inclusive tourism development.

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