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Women, Voluntourism, and Empowerment

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Title: Women, Voluntourism, and Empowerment

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Abstract:

Voluntourism can be generalized as relatively affluent western tourists visiting less privileged communities, where they pay money to volunteer in an organized way to directly or indirectly help alleviate material poverty in the host environment. The growth of voluntourism and the scale of its expansion in recent years has become a subject of interest among academics. Volunteer motivations vary and are influenced by the choice of project types, organizations, and destinations. Studies have revealed that ‘making a difference’ and ‘giving back’ are not the only drivers of international voluntourism. More individualistic reasons for participation include cultural immersion and exchange, the opportunity to travel, self-development and self-confidence gain, opportunities to enhance career skills, and language practice. Likewise, the literature identifies a list of benefits and demerits of the phenomenon for volunteers and host communities alike. Among volunteers, increased consciousness, activism, prosocial values, compassion and intercultural competence, professional development, and career enhancement have been identified as some of the key benefits of voluntourism. This exploratory project draws on 4 weeks of participatory observation in a volunteer project in Kerala, India, where 15 of the 18 volunteers present were female.

This study combines the use of participatory observation and field notes by the primary author, triangulated with semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Complementary methods were employed in order to minimize any bias or distortion that might arise from a single method study.

Emphasis is on the motivations, expectations, and perceptions of the experience of female voluntourists in three separate, relevant contexts. Participating volunteers were involved in projects working in education, women’s empowerment, healthcare, and construction, with no female volunteers undertaking construction activity, and no males participating in the women’s empowerment program. This raises the matter of the internalization of traditional gender roles and priorities by both male and female volunteers. The second theme addresses the topic of tourism and safety, exploring the possibility of the concern over the safety of women, and female tourists in India, as a factor influencing their decision to travel to the country in such an organized manner. Finally, with the growing importance of international work experience, volunteering, and working in developing countries, this project analyses the prospect of social and professional mobility of female professionals engendered post-trip. In seeking to study the subject of voluntourism in the context of a specific demographic, the research explores the influence of international development and volunteering experience of women on their lives post-trip, to locate its value in the global discourse on women’s empowerment.