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Commercial Hospitality: A Vehicle for the Sustainable Empowerment of Nepali Women

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Abstract

Purpose – To illustrate how commercial hospitality has catalysed sustainable social change in Nepal through empowering women. Utilising a new framework, developed by combining existing theories, empowerment of women Tea House owners/ managers is assessed.

Design/methodology/approach - Within a critical feminist paradigm, primary research consisting of interviews and participant observation was undertaken in Nepal over a three month period in the central region of Nepal.

Findings - Involvement in the hospitality industry improved the livelihoods of the women Tea House owners/ managers, it also has the potential to facilitate sustainable empowerment for future generations, providing them with education, choice, control and opportunities.

Research limitations/implications - Although steps were taken to limit rhetorical issues, language barriers could have influenced the findings of the interviews. To fully investigate the potential for hospitality to act as a vehicle for the sustainable empowerment of women, it is suggested that this study be replicated again in another region or that a detailed ethnographic study be carried out.

Practical Implications - Demonstrates how the commercial hospitality industry can be a force for good; women working in the industry are agents of change, actively improving their levels of empowerment in their immediate environment. The commercial hospitality industry has pioneered the empowerment of women and this could lay the foundation for the further emancipation of women.

Originality/value - To date, there has been limited research into the relationship between involvement in the commercial hospitality sector and the empowerment of women; this paper begins to fill this gap by investigating a tourist region of Nepal.

Introduction

The empowerment of women is a key topic of contemporary global political discourse. When discussing women's empowerment President Obama stated there was a duty for everyone to,

“ensure that our daughters and granddaughters have no limits on their dreams, no obstacles to their achievements - and that they have opportunities their mothers and grandmothers and great grandmothers never dreamed of” (Lee, 2009)

The need to address women's empowerment in a sustainable fashion, highlighted by President Obama, is developed by British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown and the President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf when they state “the sustained degradation and subjugation of girls and women remains the world's most pervasive human rights violation” (Brown & Johnson-Sirleaf, 2009). Further, the objective of the Grameen Bank, founded by Nobel Peace Price Winner (2006) Muhammad Yunus, is to empower women through independent income generating activities (Pitt, Khandker, & Cartwright, 2006). The fight for improving women's rights and encouraging empowerment among women has even been suggested by Leeder (2009) as a main objective of the military effort in Afghanistan, such is the prominence and drastic impact of female subjugation there.

The research undertaken for this paper focuses on women Tea House owner/managers in the mountainous central region of Nepal. Traditionally, women represent a marginalised group in Nepal and therefore, the aim is to determine whether involvement in the commercial hospitality sector can act as a vehicle for their empowerment. Consequently, this paper assesses the concept of empowerment and, through theories developed by Rowlands (1997), Scheyvens (2002) and Raj Pande et al (2004), a new model for assessing economic, political, social, psychological and sustainable empowerment is developed. While taking into account the wider economic environment of Nepal, this model is utilised to assess the empowerment of women running small commercial hospitality enterprises. As well as exploring women's empowerment, the paper also discusses an aspect of the commercial industry that has not been looked at before. The idea that involvement in commercial activity can stimulate social change is particularly pertinent in light of the comments of Gordon Brown, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, and Barack Obama, furthermore, this seeks to broaden the influence of commercial hospitality.

Carter and Shaw (2006) note that within the developed world, there has been a growth in the number of women-owned small businesses and Allen *et al* (2007) acknowledge that these women make a substantial contribution to their local economies. Yet Heyzer (2006) observes that the role of women-owned small businesses as potential catalysts of women's empowerment and development has been overlooked by researchers, international donors and policy makers alike. Furthermore, the empowerment of women is generally overlooked in the

hospitality and tourism literature, while Young (2006) records that there is a predominance of female workers in the hospitality and tourism industry, inferring a need for women's empowerment and rights to be addressed more closely in the hospitality literature.

Al-Dajani (2007, p. 20) defined women's empowerment as "a continuous, ongoing process entailing enhanced abilities to control choices, decisions and actions". This approach reaffirms Mosedale's (2005) argument that empowerment is central to a woman's role in contributing to positive change and progress within her community. Al-Dajani and Carter (2010) argue that when women are empowered, their influence and respect within the household, community and society at large is increased. Empowered women will have increased self-confidence, self-assertiveness, motivation, ambition and persistence, enabling them to ensure that their welfare needs and access to resources are recognised and met. In this sense, it is plausible that the need for social change in many countries, where the subjugation of women is commonplace and accepted to a large extent, could be driven by empowering women through entrepreneurial activities.

This concept may be particularly resonant from a commercial hospitality perspective as the hospitality industry has been a relative pioneer for worker empowerment (Conrad & Lashley, 1995; Lashley, 1995). Therefore, the phenomenon of female Tea House owners in Nepal is regarded as a potential example of commercial hospitality being used as a vehicle to influence social change within the context of women's rights and empowerment in the developing world.

Achieving social empowerment is potentially a more challenging prospect for women in Nepal than in other cultures due to the social structures referred to by Hofstede (1984). Hofstede (2005) notes that countries such as Nepal have a high power distance in the work place, with deep hierarchical structures. This is compounded by the 'masculine' nature of Nepal where it is challenging for women to gain political status and the religious trends tend to place dominance heavily with the male population. Chetterjea and Basu (1978) Phillips, Rothbard, and Dumas (2009) find that countries with a large social distance manifest more issues of integration between men and women; Hosni and Lundberg (2005) note that there are severe issues of integration between men and women in Nepal. In the case of Nepali Tea Houses, where the obstacle of men within a deep hierarchy is removed, the potential for faster, more successful empowerment politically, socially and professionally is evident. It becomes apparent that the natural shift in the power balance between men and women, catalysed by Tea Houses, could alter concepts of power and social distance in Nepal. Furthermore, these potential changes could create a change in the autonomy of women in Nepal more widely. Trompenaars (1996) developed in Bickerstaffe (2002) discuss seven key continuums of differentiation within cultures, one of these ranges from 'communitarism' to 'individualism'. Nepal is predominantly a community orientated society where this cultural

trend would tend to obstruct the autonomy and individual success that women Tea House owners are enjoying. Such individualist success could further catalyse cultural change in Nepal that would make women's empowerment more commonplace and acceptable despite collectivist traditions. This would be a particularly pivotal change as research such as that of Ridgeway, Li, Erickson, Backor, and Tinkler (2009) illustrates how difficult it can be for cultural change to take place when gender distinctions are involved as these are often deeply entrenched within cultural norms and somewhat difficult to alter.

Hospitality as a Vehicle for Empowerment

Empowerment is defined by Bystydzienski (1992, p. 3) as “a process by which oppressed persons gain some control over their lives by taking part with others in the development of activities and structures that allow people increased involvement in matters which affect them directly”. This definition, and the one offered by Cole (2007, p. 943), ‘empowerment ...provides a shift in the balance between the powerful and the powerless, between the dominant and the dependent’, supports Rowlands’ (1997) argument of there being four concepts of power – ‘power over’, ‘power to’, ‘power with’ and ‘power from within’ – and the argument that although the process of empowerment involves the use of power, this does not mean ‘power over’ as dominance; rather ‘power’ is seen as competence or ‘power to’, involving collective action to ‘shape the content and structure of their daily lives’.

Feminist ideologies of empowerment see women as agents of change, rather than beneficiaries of empowerment. Aithal’s (1999) criticism of approaches to empowerment which fail to question existing systems and the notion of power is related to the emancipatory ideology of feminism, thus although the empowerment of women in Nepal is not necessarily a feminist movement, there are shared characteristics. In addition to the philosophical perspectives found in academic literature, the term ‘empowerment’ is frequently used by a diverse range of individuals, groups and organisations at local, national and international levels, that seek to develop the position of disadvantaged individuals or groups, as described by Walker, Valaoras, Gurung and Godde (2001) and Zuckerman (2002). Central to definitions of empowerment reviewed by Elias and Ferguson (2007) is the concept of *control*; control over lives, self-respect or acceptance. Bystydzienski (1992) suggests it is this process of empowerment that allows an individual the ability to self-govern and hold power to shape their daily life and, in doing so, potentially become involved in a process of social change. Economic, social and psychological empowerment and political empowerment represent the four underpinning dimensions of Scheyvens’ (1999) model for empowerment. These relate to Rowlands’ (1997) concepts of power and, combined, could form a potentially useful model for assessing the mix of professional and social empowerment of women in Nepal.

In a study exploring high performance work practices in Ireland, Connolly and McGing (2007) find that the hospitality industry has been a driver in the advancement of work

practices and empowering workers in general to improve staff representation and participation. According to Bennett, Tamang, Onta, and Thapa (2006), tourism can be a means to empower groups of people, while addressing inequality and poverty. Conrad and Lashley (1995) note that the revolution of staff empowerment in the hospitality industry was born out of the desire to improve the quality and efficiency of customer service by removing layers and barriers that traditionally obstruct service procedures. Although fuelled by the pursuit of increased profit, the drive to empower staff in the hospitality industry has resulted in heightened levels of autonomy amongst service staff, thereby improving their commitment (Lashley, 1995). Ford and Heaton (2001) and Klidas, Van Den Berg, and Wilderom (2007) find that empowered staff are better communicators and more capable of dealing with difficulties. Furthermore, empowered staff tend to be happier in their jobs, leading to increased job satisfaction.

In a literature review of employee empowerment, Margaret and Erstad (1997); Sachs and McArthur (2005); Umashankar and Kulkarni (2002); Walker, et al. (2001) and Zuckerman (2002) find that in the Indian sub-continent and South East Asia, the hospitality industry has helped lift individuals out of impoverished environments by empowering them within their roles in the hospitality industry. Notwithstanding the general benefits of staff empowerment within the industry, hospitality is beneficial for empowerment as the nature in which empowerment has been implemented into service practice is a result of a close analysis of existing power structures and operating procedures, which have created 'power to' empowerment of staff. Essentially the hospitality industry has avoided 'empowerment for empowerment's sake' and, according to Aithal (1999), it has sought to ensure sustainable empowerment is achieved among staff.

The results of a collaborative undertaking, involving the Overseas Development Institute, the International Institute for Environment and Development, the Centre for Responsible Tourism at the University of Greenwich and funded by a research unit of Department for International Development for a Pro – Poor Tourism Project, found that a positive effect of hospitality and tourism, in terms of social capital, is the empowerment of communities and women Cattarinich (2001). This shows that hospitality and tourism operations can have an effect on individuals in a socio-cultural context; furthermore it has proven success in empowering women in particular. It was found that through their involvement in Tanzanian trekking and safari tourism, Maasai women became more economically empowered as they were paid directly, eliminating the interference of 'middlemen' and community elites (Cattarinich, 2001). Based on this evidence, it is apparent that hospitality can effectively and sustainably empower people from a small-scale, micro-financing perspective to an international commercial industry perspective and may be particularly effective in addressing issues surrounding subordinated women.

Hospitality in Nepal

In 1951, Richter (2006) notes that Nepal began to open up to international travellers and tourism began without state backing or much regulation. In the 1970s, tourism was officially recognised as an industry and integral to the country's development (K. Bhattarai, Conway, & Shrestha, 2005; Dhakal, 2005; Thapa, 2004). The Ten-year Tourism Master Plan was produced in 1972, according to Richter (2006), and since then, Kohler (2009) notes that tourism development has been central to Nepal's Five Year Economic Plans, with policies adapting as tourism has evolved.

Following the establishment of democracy in 1990, Walker et al (2001) note that tourism development underwent rapid growth as liberal policies resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of hotels, travel agencies and airlines operating in the area. However, the internal problems of Nepal and the international war on terrorism combined to produce, what external opinions consider to be, a failure to meet the necessary levels of security and stability to attract tourists (K. Bhattarai, et al., 2005; Thapa, 2004). Correspondingly, and despite claims that "tourists were free to travel and trek in the areas of tourism interest" (Baral, Baral, & Morgan, 2004, p. 189), arrival numbers declined according to Thapa (2004). While the domestic industry has made efforts to ensure the safety of tourists, both the US State Department and the UK Foreign Office advised all non-essential travel to the country be deferred, thereby, according to Baral et al (2004), cementing the image of Nepal as unsafe.

Trekking is the most lucrative tourist activity, with 43% of tourists that visit Nepal indicating the activity, listed as one of nine options on arrival cards, as their major reason to visit (Boniface & Cooper, 2005; Thapa, 2004). In 2008, tourist arrivals in Nepal achieved 500,277, with the average length of stay of 11.78 days (L. Bhattarai, Kayastha, Tuladhar, & Pokhrel, 2009). For the same time period, total tourism receipts attained over US\$350,000,000, with an average spend per day per tourist of US\$73. The bed capacity of the country is stated at 26,063 (including Kathmandu) and 10,498 (in 'out stations') (L. Bhattarai, et al., 2009). Although data is not available on the quantity of Tea Houses across the country, within five VDCs –Ghandruk, Lumle, Dangsing, Sikha, Narchayung – there are approximately 300 Tea Houses (Gurung, 2008). Nepal (2000) finds that the majority of trekking occurs in four areas of the country – Royal Chitwan National Park, Sagarmartha National Park, Langtang National Park and the Annapurna Conservation Area Project. All areas are protected and have been developed as attractions in order to manage the environmental, political, socio-cultural and economic impacts of tourism that often occur during initial stages of development (Goodwin-Groen, 2007; Thapa, 2004).

The option of staying in a Tea House has replaced the previously favoured option of camping for trekkers, according to Butler and Hinch (2007), because it lightens the load. Traditionally, these Tea Houses were modified family homes; today, they are effectively a Nepali bed and breakfast-style establishment, found across mountainous regions of Nepal, such as the Annapurna range. The popularity of Tea Houses has meant that the economic benefits of the introduction of tourism are enjoyed by the indigenous people of the region (Bajracharya, Gurung, & Basnet, 2007). The first Tea House was built in 1969, according to Nepal (2007), but this number grew rapidly as the increase in trekkers to the region continued. However, despite the increase in numbers of trekkers (in 2008 there were approximately 70,000 trekkers in the region (L. Bhattarai, et al., 2009)), and the vast growth in the number of Tea Houses, Nepal (2007) finds that the product offered remains basic, with hot showers being one of the biggest enticements for trekkers.

Empowerment of Women in Nepal

Empowerment literature tends to focus on communities through the development of industry as Cole (2007); Khan (1997); and Simpson (2008) note. However, according to Walker et al (2001), involvement in the production of hospitality services is particularly apposite for women in developing regions because of their limited literacy and low levels of education; the interchange between the women producers and consumers of commercial hospitality has the potential to alter the attitudes and lives of the women through creating a sense of identity and solidarity, leading to societal change which may be considered important for the development of female representation within patriarchal societies.

Political representation policies for women exist at local and national levels. The Local Self Governance Act, introduced in 1999, established that there must be a 20% representation of women in Ward membership in local Government as well as compulsory nomination of women in the Village Development Committees and Sub-Committees (K. Bhattarai, et al., 2005). Representation or involvement of women in local political structures is cited by Scheyvens (1999) as a key indicator of political empowerment. However, little data is held on the actual representation of women in local governmental bodies. Therefore, a key aim of the primary research is to collect this data in order to measure the political empowerment of women within their local communities.

Research by Nyaupane, Morais and Dowler (2006) found that tourism development in the Annapurna region has resulted in the empowerment of women. They argue that tourism has improved the quality of life for local inhabitants and has revived the traditional culture of the region. While these findings are important, the study does not take into account the relevant and established legislation, policies and programmes designed to maximise the potential for the plan to deliver these desired outcomes. Borghi, Ensor, Neupane, and Tiwari, (2006) cite

this omission as a potentially significant weakness, as government plans and activities place a focus on the community and gender related issues. Moreover, Nyaupane *et al* (2006) do not refer to any indicators or determine how they measured the women's empowerment which allowed them to come to their conclusions. Further, the authors neglected to measure the women's psychological, social and political empowerment and solely focused on their economic empowerment through economic independence and the community's social empowerment. Although the economic empowerment of women is imperative, without the other three dimensions – social, political and psychological, women's status cannot be considered sustainable or permanent.

Economic empowerment, political empowerment, social empowerment, and psychological empowerment form the context for Scheyvens' (1999) model, with political and economical empowerment relating to 'power to' empowerment, the pivotal element for the empowerment of women in Nepal. A model, emerging from the reviewed literature combines the research of Rowlands (1997), Scheyvens (2002) and Raj Pande *et al* (2004) to provide a framework for analysing the nature and extent of empowerment amongst women in Nepal.

[Take in Figure 1 – Combined Empowerment Model]

Empowerment in hospitality is a result of the power structures being addressed and altered to aid the individual and the organisation. In this sense, hospitality could be vital to the sustainable empowerment of women in Nepal as it allows them to be actors in social change by allowing them to exercise their autonomy, creating a 'power to' dynamic within the context of all four empowerment dimensions.

Methodology

In order to apply the model shown in Figure 1, critical feminist theory is adopted; it is a fusion of both critical theory, which is an analysis of societal institutions in order to highlight dominant structures, and feminist theory, which, as highlighted by the research of Breitzkreuz (2005) is understood as the analysis of the subordination of women in order to pursue a path for change. The theory utilises gender as a category of analysis when highlighting structural domination to transform systems and liberate disadvantaged and oppressed individuals (Breitzkreuz, 2005). A critical feminist theoretical approach, according to Fay (1987), therefore offers a framework to research the link between the individual experiences of women and structural oppression.

Data Collection

The research is carried out in a mountainous region, where women experience heightened levels of sexual and ethnic discrimination, compounded by isolation and traditional and entrenched patriarchal structures (Walker, et al., 2001). The focus of this research is placed upon mountain women for a number of reasons. Firstly, Kollmair, Manandhar, Subedi and Thieme (2006) find that there is a high rate of outward-migration by men, traditionally to the lowlands of Nepal, India or Pakistan and more recently to the Gulf, UK and USA, because of the lack of opportunities in the mountainous regions of Nepal. As the women are left behind to fend for themselves and their children, the necessity for women to be financially independent is increasing, according to Anand and Josse (2002), and therefore, the focus is on sustainable empowerment rather than temporary empowerment.

Secondly, women in mountainous regions of Nepal have increased workloads. According to Sherpa (2007), in addition to their traditional domestic duties, they are also responsible for the collection of water and firewood and therefore face difficulties due to the harsh climatic conditions and terrain. It is because of the increased workload that many women have grown dependent on their hospitality businesses and the developing industry for their subsistence and economic development (Sherpa, 2007).

A third reason is also due to the remoteness of the villages: education and literacy levels are much lower in rural regions, according to Borghi, et al (2006). Fourth, because of the remoteness of the mountain villages, indigenous people have had to rely solely upon agriculture for their livelihoods due to limited economic and employment opportunities. As tourism has increased, involvement has become an alternative occupation for the inhabitants.

Interview Protocol and Sample

Primary research was undertaken in Nepal over a three month period during the summer of 2008 in the Kathmandu Valley and the Annapurna Conservation Area in central Nepal. Overall, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted (male= 6, female = 18). However, beyond the Tea House managers/ owners who were all women, the gender of the interviewees was not relevant. The participants were selected based on their standings within planning and development organisations in Nepal and their experience or knowledge of the topic. Interview participants have been separated into two main categories. The eleven participants who have a role in planning and development form the first category were interviewed in Kathmandu. Government representatives, non-governmental and semi-governmental organisations, research organisations and consultants were interviewed to examine how the involvement in the hospitality industry, through the establishment of small businesses, could affect the lives of those in the mountainous regions of Nepal.

These interviews in were arranged prior to arriving in Nepal and held in the offices or workplaces of the participants. The remaining 13 participants were owner/ managers of the Tea Houses and community groups from villages along one of the trails in the Annapurna region. All participants were selected based on their standings within the organisations, their experience or knowledge of the industry and were interviewed at their workplaces except for the Mothers Groups who arranged a meeting point within the village. The Tea House owners were interviewed in their businesses where researchers were staying that night.

As far as the Tea House owners were concerned, convenience sampling was employed as the fieldwork followed the main tourist trekking routes. However, when interviewing government officials, a purposeful criterion based sample design was selected. Creswell notes that this type of sample allows the selection of interviewees that can “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study.

Data Analysis

Once the interview was complete, the translator would translate the full interview. In order to validate the translation, a second translator verified the transcription. As with O’Gorman et al (2010) the data analysis method used was template analysis. Template analysis encompasses a ‘group of techniques for thematically organising and analysing textual data’ (King, 2004, p.256). Essentially, emergent themes from the literature review are written up in a template from the data gathered during the research process. Three categories of analysis emerged from the interview transcriptions:

- ‘Status of women and barriers to empowerment’, which contains two subcategories, women in Nepal and barriers to empowerment
- ‘Measuring empowerment’, which contains four sub categories, economic, political, social and psychological
- ‘Involvement in the commercial hospitality sector as a vehicle for the empowerment of women’

These themes were gathered a priori but were then used as the data to which the template was applied. In this research project the template was based on Figure 1 – Combined Empowerment Model, focusing on economic, political, social and psychological empowerment all within the overarching paradigm of sustainable empowerment. Once each interview was analysed, relevant quotes relating to the themes from the interviews were extracted. The findings are organised into the four broad themes covering the development of empowerment of women in Nepali Tea Houses; all the quotes below originate from the interviews.

While all participants expressed the view that women are a subordinated population, they recognised that progress has been and is being made in terms of the status of women, although participants disagreed on the pace of progress. Specific emphasis was placed on the progress made in the national political arena because of the recently introduced 33% representation policy. Further, the importance of both education (psychological empowerment) and income generation (economic empowerment) was identified by participants as the most important variables for empowerment. From a psychological perspective, it was argued that ‘women are (psychologically) empowered, more than empowered – they are conscious, they are alert’

Analysis of the interviews uncovers differing interpretations of reality in Nepal, from a belief that women face multiple barriers in life on all aspects of Scheyvens’ model, to a conviction that there are no barriers in Nepali society for women because there are laws in place to prevent the existence of barriers. For example, a senior government minister denies the existence of barriers, but then discusses the socially constructed roles of women in Nepal:

‘If you look at it from the overall societal level, yes, the males are mostly dominant in the sense that they earn and women are mostly known for managing households. If you look at the majority of the population, this is how the structure is formed in our society. We don’t try and interfere into these household domestic things’.

This description of the gender roles is patriarchal; social barriers are also described by five other interviewees. This mind-set has penetrated from a grassroots level to policy development and national decision making. However, in almost all cases, the interviews identified a current and ongoing process of change in the country which has meant that the barriers preventing women from taking on ‘unconventional’ roles, responsibilities and positions within society are decaying. The participants argued that women are increasingly getting more opportunities and, because of this, ‘the role of women is being realised more.’

Results: Measuring dimensions of empowerment

Economic empowerment

Specifically, the aim was determine whether women, through their involvement in the hospitality industry, generated sustainable economic gains, had experienced livelihood improvements, held control over their income and had access to assets. The findings indicate that for 77% of women interviewed, establishing a commercial hospitality business and the income it generates allows them to avoid engaging in alternative industries, such as agriculture, in the low season. Their degree of involvement in alternative industries was dependent on the level of competition existing within their community (i.e. how many Tea

Houses there were in close vicinity). All participants spoke of the younger generation attending school or further education and compared business ownership with agriculture, stating that their workload had reduced because of their involvement in tourism. Control over income differed between participants. 46% reported joint decision making in the household while 54% claimed complete control over income and decision making within their home and business; as one Tea House owner said: 'if I don't like it, it's not going to happen. It's not like that – the man directing the woman, it's not like that'. Women with the most control were unmarried and supporting their parents and younger siblings. Overall, the findings highlight that women's involvement in the hospitality industry has increased their independence and reduced their workload (as compared to agriculture), thus improving their quality of life.

Political Empowerment

The interviews aimed to determine whether women had developed political empowerment both outside the household – representation of women in political structures and the opportunity for their involvement – and within the household – non monetary decision making. Political empowerment of women is divided into 'away from home' and 'within the home'. In 'away from home' politics, the representation of women in national political structures commonly raised debate about the manner of their representation. 'Tokenism' is of concern, if admittance into the Constituent Assembly was based solely upon gender, their authority would be undermined. At local level, women had little representation in the decision making administrative structures (women held 7% seats instead of 26% they should hold) but held representation through Mothers Groups. Reasons given for non-involvement were social barriers, lack of time, education and impetus ; as described by one of the mothers: "...if you ask me to sit on a committee full of men, I don't want to, you know, its full of men I don't want to be on a committee that's just men, I'm not interested" However, the Mothers Groups penetrate all four dimensions of empowerment. Because of their position within the community, the Mothers Groups have altered the socially constructed representation of a Nepali woman, developing their socially accepted roles and responsibilities.

Political empowerment practice in Nepal does not reflect the rhetoric of gender equity and equality of the government. In line with feminist discourse, which views women as 'agents of change' rather than beneficiaries of development, the literature review highlights the high level of participation by women while interview findings show that women Tea House owners have actively increased their own social, psychological and economic empowerment; however, their political empowerment has increased less dramatically. The developmental efforts, made by national government in Kathmandu, to rectify gender inequality by law, have not penetrated communities at a local level. However, the current government was only recently established and the Local Self Governance Act (1999) was passed during a period of intense political turmoil. It may take some time for the intention of the law to become reality.

Regarding ‘within the home’ political empowerment, the interviews focused on non-economic political empowerment, potentially providing a woman with control over her future and the future of her children. Change is a recurrent issue, with all women Tea House owners expressing a preference for remaining in the hospitality industry because of their lack of education which limits their options to business ownership or agriculture. The next generation of Nepali women (and men) would be able to select from wider-ranging occupational alternatives due to increased schooling. All women interviewed spoke of their children (or younger siblings) making their own life decisions.

Social empowerment

To determine the levels of social empowerment, the interview questions focused on the cohesion between women and the community and whether women community groups existed. Mothers Groups are critical in increasing sustainability. Their contributions have increased the respect the community have for all women. Mothers Groups actively raise money from tourists through cultural shows, or the cultural museum in Ghandruk, and invest the raised funds in the community by building trails and cleaning the villages. Through their contributions, Mothers Groups have raised the profile of women and broken through cultural and social barriers. Over time, the discrimination faced by women has lessened, because, as one respondent noted:

The unmarried women working in the hospitality businesses, sometimes the men, mainly outsiders, look down on them. They think that they have broken with tradition – working by themselves with outside men. But we don’t have those problems here anymore – in the outside villages, they often have that problem”

Through their involvement in the hospitality industry, women have gained increased respect from the community. This, combined with the direct contributions made by the Mothers Group, has resulted in the status of women as a whole being raised. However, specifically related to the Tea House owners, research interviews identify a link between the generation of income and the rising social status of women. The link between increased social status within the community and increased income could be considered inevitable because of the extreme poverty traditionally endured in remote mountain regions in Nepal.

Teahouse owners’ incomes (and therefore status) are measured relative to the rest of the community. If tourist arrivals to the region are to grow as projected and the Annapurna Conservation Area Project’s aim of tourism development benefiting all members of the community is to be achieved, it is clear that social status and respect from the community, and sustainable social empowerment, would have to be based upon other criteria in addition to income. Although unmarried women Tea House owners/managers were initially ‘looked

down upon', over time, the men within their village have shown less resistance to women adopting more autonomous roles. However, where women have gained respect, this is essentially an outcome of the income generated by the women through their businesses, pointing towards the crucial importance of economic empowerment in the overall empowerment process.

The raised the profile of women fuelled by the increased presence of Mothers Groups is considered beneficial for Nepali women from a cultural perspective as these groups use the collectivist nature of Nepali culture to stimulate social differentiation between men and women, thus using one aspect of the culture to combat a more negative and oppressive aspect (Bickerstaffe, 2002; Hofstede, 1984, 2005). The issues of social status highlighted by Chetterjea and Basu (1978) and Phillips, Rothbard, and Dumas (2009) relate rather strongly to the ability of women to earn. One factor that emerges from the research, indicating changes in social status, is the increased ability of women to earn. This has far increased the autonomy of the women involved in Tea Houses and Mothers Groups and as a result the distance in social status between men and women is seen to have decreased. The perceived magnitude of such change is amplified by the discussions of Ridgeway et al. (2009) where it is established that ideas of social distinction within gender roles can often act as unstoppable drivers of inequality.

Psychological empowerment

Specifically, the aim was to determine whether the women Tea House owners had undergone education, skill development and training, contributed to community enhancement, received respect from the community and had self respect and an increase in self esteem. Interview findings regarding psychological empowerment have determined that the women Tea House owners do not feel subordinated as Bennett et al (2006) and Sherpa (2007) suggest. All women interviewed expressed confidence and happiness which, they add, has increased over time since establishing their businesses. Literacy and education levels in rural areas are low. However, in line with the policy of gender development, the Annapurna Conservation Area Project encourages women to attend training and skill development courses; all of the participants spoke of attending these classes. The reasons for attending the skill development courses varied from participant to participant but the following themes emerged:

- Provided the motivation to establish the business: 'I got an opportunity to get that training and that gave me an idea to start my own Tea House'
- Support and encouragement when establishing the business: 'It was difficult in the beginning; I didn't know how to run it, (or) what would happen, but I got some training from Annapurna Conservation Area Project in hospitality'

Participants remarked that they felt more confident to talk to others or had become bolder while they found it easier to speak to men where they once had been scared of them.

Sustainable empowerment from Commercial Hospitality

The sustainable aspect of these dimensions is critical for the women Tea House owners/managers and future generations. The women spoke of their ability to send their children or younger siblings to school or abroad because of the income generated by the Tea Houses. The women displayed control over their income and an awareness of the importance of education for future generations, possibly because of their own lack of education which has limited their opportunities. As one woman noted:

‘Being illiterate, I feel that it’s a disadvantage. In Kathmandu, there are a lot of educated people and I’d have to compete with them for employment’

The actions of the Mothers Groups have increased community cohesion and corroded social barriers, allowing women Tea House owners/managers to successfully adopt new roles and responsibilities without discrimination.

One participant spoke of her illiteracy which has limited her options in life. At the same time however, she expressed confidence, contentedness, lasting economic gains, joint decision making within her household; she also made contributions to the Mothers Groups in her community. She spoke of her daughters – one studying in Kathmandu and the other studying in New Mexico, USA – and their futures, their decision making and control over their lives. Clearly, her daughters’ empowerment has not derived from but has been *enabled* by commercial hospitality businesses. This illustrates the ‘Power to’ dynamic that has been nurtured by women in Nepal, and the importance of this power dynamic is illustrated by its sustainability.

However, the role of women remains relatively unchanged as they move from running a household to running a Tea House. Essentially, the women are still caring for dependents. At the same time, whether it is outward-migration or involvement in the local administrative structures, the men are still leaving the community to seek work elsewhere, as they did when they were involved in livestock farming. Therefore, traditional roles remain constant. Lack of access to education limits opportunities for women to compete in the job market. For the current generation, options are narrow due to limited education and the hardship involved in agricultural farming (as well as the dependence on the changing monsoon season). As a result, the women established their businesses for income generation and because they already possessed the required skills to run a household.

It is hoped that although they are still fulfilling what are traditionally women's roles, but now undertaking these roles for money, women can become sustainably empowered. This point underlines the natural ability of hospitality to empower the individuals in this study as the traditional, 'soft' skills possessed by the women in the region were easily applied to the running of Tea Houses. Illustrated here is the point that a gender revolution does not need to take place for women to become empowered, the results discussed suggest that, were men to engage in such activities, they would not experience the same success as the women, nor would Tea Houses currently be such a feature of the landscape in Nepal, because their skills are not applicable.

Empowerment of women in the Annapurna region is greater than Bennett et al (2006) suggest it should be: the women Tea House owners/managers do not represent the subordinated population; instead they are recipients of community respect, active members of society, economically independent and possess confidence and self-assuredness. However, at the same time, these women are fortunate in the sense that, without the introduction of tourism to their communities, they would still be adopting the same role but would not have undergone the process of empowerment. Nepal is in a transition and, similarly, traditional beliefs regarding gender roles and responsibilities are also changing. As sustainability means that the impacts of involvement in the hospitality industry should be carried over into future generations, the key question that remains is: will the actions of today positively impact on future generations.

In the current generation it is not the content of the role or the skills involved that empowers an individual; rather it is the effect or outcome of doing the job. As has been already stated, applying the 'female' skills before the growth of the hospitality and tourism industries disempowered women while the application of the same skills after the development of tourism has empowered the women Tea House owners through at least three (economic, social and political) of the four dimensions of Scheyvens' (1999) framework. Somewhat ironically then, the traditional roles which had once been the cause of their marginalisation, have now become the root of their empowerment. Women Tea House owners/managers are economically independent, enjoy lighter workloads, have raised status, are respected by the community and represented in community groups, they also feel more confident. It could be argued that through their active participation, the current generation of Nepali women represent stage one of empowerment and have laid the foundation for the next generation of Nepali women to participate in a subsequent stage of sustainable empowerment.

Conclusions

This paper investigated the ability of small scale commercial hospitality businesses to act as a vehicle for the sustainable empowerment of women in the central region of Nepal. The research shows that in an environment where women traditionally represent the marginalised population, the female Tea House owners/managers display higher levels of economic, social and psychological empowerment. While their level of political empowerment has improved, further improvement relies on the active involvement of national and local political structures to communicate and ensure gender equality. Despite this, the pivotal element within the four dimensions of empowerment appears to be economic empowerment. Increased levels of economic empowerment had the greatest positive effect on overall empowerment of women in the region.

The research took into account the next generation and how the activities of the current generation could impact upon their future opportunities. The findings showed that the potential empowerment of future generations may not derive from, but may be enabled by, involvement in the commercial hospitality sector. However, their sustainable empowerment is also dependent on the removal of a number of barriers which currently limit the empowerment of women. Involvement in the commercial hospitality sector can act as a vehicle for the sustainable empowerment for women, although it has been noted that to ensure long term sustainable empowerment, every empowerment dimension must be adequately represented. The sustainability dimension is critical for the next generation of Nepali women. It is not necessarily the Tea Houses that will empower them – although it might be that way for some – rather, for many their empowerment has been catalysed by their mothers' involvement in hospitality and endowed them with a better quality of life, better expectations, a better situation in relation to the four dimensions of empowerment and critically, a better education, opening up options which were previously closed to their mothers.

The next generation of women should have control over their lives, decision making and issues which directly impact on their lives. Whether the impact of involvement in the commercial hospitality sector is sustainable or not goes beyond the hospitality businesses, pointing to a range of opportunities for the next generation of women. These women are fortunate in the sense that, without the introduction of tourism to their communities, they would still be performing the same roles but would not have undergone the process of empowerment. This demonstrates the fundamental role played by commercial hospitality in the empowerment of Nepali women, who have achieved 'power to' exercise autonomy. Crucially, this should lay the foundations for future generations of women, who will build on a perpetuating phenomenon triggered by small scale commercial hospitality enterprises. To some extent it would seem that the political dimension will be pivotal to the ultimate sustainability of this social change in Nepal.

Further research is clearly required to fully investigate the potential for small scale commercial hospitality enterprises to act as a vehicle for the sustainable empowerment of women. Further information is required to support the work of the United Nations Development Programme and other such organisations and therefore it is suggested that this study be replicated again in another region of Nepal or that a detailed ethnographic study be carried out there and elsewhere in the developing world.


The already established ability for commercial hospitality to empower individuals has a potential application in bringing about social change within communities and societies where the subordination and subjugation of groups prevents acceptable levels of autonomy and empowerment. Commercial hospitality operations can provide women, who are subjected to such discrimination, with a platform from which they can catalyse social change. By exploring women's empowerment, this research has also hinted at the ability of commercial hospitality to be a driver for social change by creating an environment that utilises behaviour applicable to everyday life. The nature in which commercial hospitality empowers individuals has also been shown to be sustainable even beyond the duties they perform at work; indeed, it is applicable within a wide social context.

The characteristics of both the Nepali culture and gender distinction in Nepal, identified in the review of literature have emerged as factors in the results of the research. It became apparent that aspects of Nepali culture acted as barriers in the empowerment of women. The evidence presented has illustrated that the nature of women's involvement in Tea Houses has affected a change in social distance and gender distinction in Nepal. This has allowed women to assert their autonomy, be better represented in the governmental system and move closer to a more balanced gender distinction in the country.

The concepts of culture outlined by Trompenaars (1996) and Hofstede (2005) focus predominantly on the identification of differences between cultures in situations where there is multicultural interaction. From the results of this research, it is evident that application of aspects of these multicultural analysis frameworks could be applied to individual cultures such as the Nepali culture to better understand how and why culture change is affected. The empowerment of women in Nepal has seen a move from a 'masculine' society, to a more 'feminine' society where social distance is less apparent and gender distinction is not as strongly articulated by social norms and constructs. This move has been driven by the collectives of women associated with Tea Houses to build a sense of autonomy both for individuals and for women as a group. The application of theories relating to research carried-out by Trompenaars (1996) and Hofstede (2005) lies in the apparent cyclical nature of social change within cultural norms. This infers that an aspect such as the collectivist nature of Nepali culture has influenced the related cultural norm of large social distance and a masculine mentality. The result is that the culture has become more 'feminine' as women

have closed the social gap somewhat and, indeed, moved the Nepali cultural norm to a more individualist mentality as women have gained autonomy and representation. Therein lies a clear application of cultural analysis to illustrate the reciprocal influence asserted between cultural norms, values and constructs.

In relation to the wider theme of global female emancipation, what this study demonstrates is that radical societal or cultural change is not required in order to bring about female empowerment in the developing world. Unlike agriculture or the manufacturing industry, industries such as hospitality and tourism, which rely on traditionally 'soft' skills, can create opportunities for such skills to be employed within a context that brings about social change. With women's rights and the need to empower women, particularly in developing countries, having been cited as a contemporary issue, this research has alluded to the global contribution commercial hospitality can make to this matter. In asserting the effect this phenomenon has had on the women studied, the international commercial hospitality community cannot ignore the duty it has to continue to facilitate social change in this regard. The revelation of the effect involvement with the commercial hospitality industry has had on the lives of women in Nepal serves to extend the realms that commercial hospitality has the ability to penetrate and influence.

Rowlands (1997)		Scheyvens' indicators for empowerment (2002)		Raj Pande et al (2004)
Power to		Power over	Economic empowerment	 Sustainable empowerment
			Lasting economic gains are enjoyed by women Visible signs of livelihood improvement Permanent housing smaller workloads children attending school control over income access to assets	
Power with		Power from within	Political empowerment	
			women are able/ have the opportunity to exercise control over tourism/ hospitality initiatives of village women are represented in political structures decision making at household level – control over income	
	Power with		Social empowerment	
			community cohesion – respect for women community groups – e.g. women's groups women contribute to betterment of community – fund raising	
		Power from within	Psychological empowerment	
			education and training skill development gaining respect within community self-esteem and self-respect confidence	

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