

**Title:** Will the ‘Ideal Tourism Worker’ Please Stand Up? Analysing Gender Essentialism within Tourism Workforce Recruitment through Flexibility Discourse

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**Abstract:**

Attracting and keeping skilled professionals is one the largest challenges facing the tourism industry, illustrated by the very high employee turnover rates in tourism (Baum, 2013; Deery & Jago, 2009; Santero-Sanchez et al., 2015). High employee turnover rates are largely attributed to tourism work’s low-paid nature but also to the difficulties in maintaining a work-life balance because of the long, irregular, and unsociable work hours and shift work characteristic of tourism labour. Social reproduction encompasses all the activities undertaken to maintain the present and future generation (e.g., caring, housework) and is essential to the capitalist process of accumulation. However, responsibility for social reproduction is often connected with femininity, meaning that female tourism workers have or are perceived to have less flexibility at work. ‘Flexibility’ is itself a highly ambiguous and debated term within the context of labour relations (Brumley, 2014). In this paper, flexibility is defined as the employee characteristic to be available to work whenever the employer wants him/her to.

Gender roles can play a significant role in how the ‘ideal tourism worker’ discourse is constructed. However, there is limited literature that investigates how gender roles influence tourism recruitment practices. Hence this paper’s main research objective is to investigate how gender roles influence constructions of ‘ideal tourism worker’ discourse, through the lens of the employee characteristic of *flexibility* in tourism recruitment. The impetus to critique existing ‘ideal tourism worker’ discourse is rooted in the idea that the neoclassical economics model of ‘rational economic man’, according to which all individuals operate solely with the aim of creating more individual profit, is flawed. From a feminist economics angle, agency cannot be reduced to a simple case of “individual utility maximisation strategy” (Gammage et al., 2016, p. 2).

Qualitative and quantitative data from a unique three-year project on the role of gender in tourism labour in Portugal informs this study. Quantitative data was gathered between September 2013 and March 2015 via online surveys, 401 of which were eventually considered valid. In the questionnaires, the respondents were asked to rate criteria that commonly influence companies’ recruitment practices. Qualitative data was co-created through focus groups with 79 participants over the period November 2013 to March 2014. Qualitative and quantitative research participants were tourism managers from the public and private tourism sectors from all seven Portuguese administrative regions (mainland and islands). Thematic analysis methods were used for a systematic examination of the collected data, using a mix of deductive and inductive approaches in the iterative process.

Data analysis suggests that whilst there is an overall impression that attaining ‘ideal worker’ status ‘*all has to do with the attitude, availability, professionalism and the willingness to accomplish*’ (P45), something is influencing female workers’ ability to adhere to current ‘ideal tourism worker’ models. In-depth analysis of focus groups reveals how the male hegemony within ‘ideal tourism worker’ discourse is perpetuated: through silences. Recruiters do not

specifically talk about what good male worker characteristics are, but do talk about good female worker characteristics. The connection between social reproductive gender roles and flexibility is evident in the qualitative data, where managers comment on how women are less available because they *choose* to prioritise family over work. However, some tourism managers in this study challenge 'ideal worker' discourse, which excludes women because of their perceived unavailability, by pointing out that female employees are often more available than male employees. Tourism managers also challenge the masculinised 'ideal worker' norm, by introducing certain feminine characteristics into the 'ideal worker' discourse. They do this by saying how female workers are better than male workers in various ways, such as being more responsible and more attentive to detail than men.

We hope that critical evaluations of the dialectics between power and knowledge that construct norms which define economic activities, such as the present one, can contribute to the creation of a more socially just society and economically viable tourism industry.

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