

Title: Questioning the Empowerment Discourse: The Case of Rural Women in Ecotourism in Post-revolutionary Tunisia

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Abstract:

Tourism is one of the sectors that has been most affected by the country's political instability after the revolution in 2011. In particular, the two terrorist attacks in 2015, namely the one at Bardo's museum in March 2015 and the one of Sousse in June of the same year, resulted in dramatically decreased tourism activity and all the related business such as transport, communications, crafts, trade, and construction. Along with this crisis, there is a solidarity movement that is being felt more and more in Tunisia, especially among young people and women. These subpopulations are mobilizing to reinvent the economy and overcome precariousness. The so-called "social and solidarity economy" (SSE) appears as a substitute for the public sector, as a solution to create employment and solve social and economic problems. In the same fashion, tourism was the first sector in creating new projects with social impact. These new projects aim to create employment and also promote local tourism in the country in order to depend less on international tourism. Within this context and under the discourse of empowerment, the figure of the rural woman is more visible. However, Tunisia is a society where regionalism, among other factors, creates social categories and social inequalities. Similarly, while the Tunisian women are the figures of independent women in the Arab world, the ones who are "shining" on TV and in international political speeches are often the elite women. They are figures of emancipation because they look like Western women. The rural women, the ones who wear "hijab," work during olive harvest season, and do housework are only visible when it comes to promoting the social and solidarity economy. This leads us to question the rural women's empowerment discourse using a feminist approach. Women's empowerment through tourism has been studied as a way to challenge the traditional gender role of women as being only housewives, while men provide the financial support (Moswete & Lacey, 2015). However, some tourism studies highlight the disempowerment effect of tourism (Aghazamania and Hunt, 2017). In this paper we seek to understand if the SSE in the tourism sector is emancipatory for rural women or, on the contrary, if it is a marketing tool exploiting

them? In order to answer this question, a qualitative study will be held in Tunisia combining different methods, namely participant observation in Dar el Ain (an ecotourism center built around a social and solidarity enterprise), interviews with different stakeholders (government, NGOs, social entrepreneurs, and rural women) and also secondary data.

Aghazamani, Y., & Hunt, C. A. (2017). Empowerment in Tourism: A Review of Peer-Reviewed Literature. *Tourism Review International*, 21(4), 333-346.

Moswete, N., & Lacey, G. (2015). "Women cannot lead": Empowering women through cultural tourism in Botswana. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 23(4), 600–617.
