

Empowering rural economies through women-led tourism enterprises in local development

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Abstract: This study explores the role of women-led businesses in the economic development of rural tourism, focusing on identifying both challenges and opportunities. Based on structured survey data collected from women entrepreneurs in a rural context, the research evaluates the impact of their entrepreneurial activities on tourism growth and local development. The results highlight significant barriers faced by women, including limited access to start-up capital, ongoing financial constraints, and restrictive cultural norms. Despite these obstacles, the study finds that women-owned enterprises play a vital role in promoting cultural heritage, enhancing local tourism experiences, and supporting agricultural-based tourism initiatives. These contributions not only foster economic growth but also reshape the social and professional identities of women in rural communities. The study concludes that targeted support from governmental institutions, civil society, and local stakeholders is essential to overcome structural limitations and empower women entrepreneurs. The findings offer valuable insights into the socio-economic and cultural dynamics influencing rural tourism and underscore the need for inclusive development strategies that recognize and strengthen the role of women in rural entrepreneurship.

Keywords: *Krusha e Madhe, economic development, Rural tourism, Women-owned businesses, Women's empowerment.*

1. Introduction

Women-owned businesses are among the fastest-growing enterprises globally, including in Kosovo, contributing significantly to innovation, employment generation, and wealth creation. Their share in the development of national economies is estimated at around 40%. Despite this, the overall contribution of women entrepreneurs remains under-researched, with less than 10% of entrepreneurship studies focusing on women's entrepreneurship.

Female-led enterprises are steadily increasing worldwide, contributing not only to household income but also to the broader growth of national economies. However, women continue to face multiple constraints, temporal, human, physical, and social, that limit their ability to expand their businesses [1]. The Women's Entrepreneurship Development Resource Point was established in response to the growing demand for best practices and tools to integrate gender in private sector development and entrepreneurship promotion programs, while also addressing the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs. According to Manzano, et al. [2] "It was designed to serve a dual purpose: to provide practical guidance and recommendations and to act as a hub for programs, new research, and data on the topic."

Globally, women entrepreneurs play a critical role in economic growth and poverty reduction. In the United States, for instance, women-owned firms are growing at more than twice the rate of all other firms, contributing nearly \$3 trillion to the economy and directly generating 23 million jobs. In

developing countries, women's entrepreneurship is also on the rise, with an estimated 8 to 10 million small and medium enterprises (SMEs) having at least one female owner [3].

Despite their growing presence in entrepreneurship, women continue to face significant barriers that inhibit the expansion of their businesses, including limited access to capital, restrictive social norms, and time and skill constraints. In Kosovo, particularly in the village of Krusha e Madhe, women engaged in traditional handicrafts encounter numerous challenges when starting and managing their businesses. As Al-Qahtani, et al. [4] outlines, "Key difficulties include high tax rates, limited market demand, administrative burdens, lack of time for specialized training, family responsibilities, restricted market access, financing costs, unreliable electricity supply, tax evasion and informality, limited access to materials and assets, tax administration complexity, inadequate maternity leave policies, difficulty accessing credit, repayment challenges, social bias, and gender discrimination".

This study aims to investigate how women-led businesses contribute to diversifying the rural tourism offer in Krusha e Madhe through the development of unique products and services closely tied to local culture and environment. Additionally, it examines the role of these businesses in improving local infrastructure, promoting handicrafts, and creating new employment opportunities for the rural community.

The purpose of this research is to raise awareness about the potential of women-owned businesses in the context of rural tourism development in Krusha e Madhe. The findings may serve as a guide for local authorities, NGOs, and private enterprises in supporting women's initiatives to advance tourism and contribute to the sustainable development of rural communities. With a special emphasis on women's leadership in business innovation and cultural promotion, this study seeks to shed light on the untapped potential of women to transform rural landscapes into attractive tourism destinations and stimulate local economic growth through sustainable and responsible tourism.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. *The Role of Rural Tourism in Local Development*

Rural tourism has emerged as a significant contributor to local economic development, particularly in regions where traditional industries are declining. Within this context, microenterprises play a central role, especially in rural areas where economic activities are often limited. As highlighted by Al-Qahtani, et al. [4] many rural tourism businesses are operated by individuals with a lifestyle orientation, whereby entrepreneurship serves as a means to achieve personal, familial, and social equilibrium rather than as a mechanism for wealth accumulation. In this model, owners tend to adopt cautious financial strategies and avoid high-risk investments, often guided by the belief that "prudence is a virtue" [5].

A characteristic feature of rural tourism is its family-based structure, frequently functioning as a "family project" in which personal and familial considerations take precedence over purely economic factors. This is particularly evident in rural areas of both developing and developed countries, where women are predominant in tourism entrepreneurship. As noted by Albert and Whetten [6] female entrepreneurs in rural tourism often engage in pluriactivity and multitasking, navigating between domestic roles and business responsibilities. This dual engagement reflects a broader socio-economic adaptation to the demands of rural livelihoods and the necessity of flexibility in the face of uncertain income streams.

The development of rural tourism enterprises not only supports individual families but also contributes to the revitalization of rural communities. According to Quinones [1] tourism-related businesses support approximately 370 million jobs globally, underscoring their role in enhancing household incomes and elevating living standards. Similarly, Asher [3] has emphasized the capacity of tourism to stimulate local economies by fostering small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly by creating opportunities for women and youth, and thereby contributing to poverty reduction.

In rural settings, tourism enterprises have the added benefit of supporting regional development. As Lievens, et al. [7] argue, rural entrepreneurship facilitates the establishment of new businesses, such as farms and guesthouses, in remote or underserved areas. These activities generate employment, reduce urban migration pressures, and provide residents with alternative income sources. The interdependence between tourism development and local entrepreneurship is further highlighted by Leung [8] who underscores the importance of community participation in ensuring sustainable and inclusive tourism growth. Local people often act as service providers or sell handcrafted goods to visitors, thus organically becoming entrepreneurs and contributing to the economic viability of their regions.

Moreover, this dynamic is cyclical: tourist expenditures increase demand for local products and services, thereby boosting revenues and incentivizing further investment. As noted by Whetten [9] the development of tourism not only improves infrastructure and amenities but also strengthens rural economies, offering viable solutions to chronic issues such as unemployment and poverty in underdeveloped regions.

2.1. Gender Dimensions in the Rural Tourism Workforce

The tourism sector, like many others, is characterized by horizontal and vertical gender segmentation in the labor market. Horizontally, men and women are often employed in gender-typical roles: women predominantly work as waitresses, cleaners, travel agents, and flight attendants, while men are more likely to be gardeners, drivers, construction workers, and pilots [10]. Vertically, the industry displays a "gender pyramid" wherein women occupy lower-level positions with limited opportunities for career advancement, while managerial and decision-making roles are typically held by men.

Despite increasing levels of female educational attainment and their significant presence in the global workforce, over 40%, according to recent estimates, women remain underrepresented in managerial roles. This phenomenon is often described as the "glass ceiling" effect. As Bryman [11] discusses, numerous interlocking socio-cultural factors sustain gender inequality in the labor market. These include traditional gender roles, stereotypical perceptions of women's abilities, and gender identity constructs, which collectively influence both employment opportunities and women's career aspirations. Additionally, women are often tasked with unpaid domestic responsibilities, such as child-rearing, elder care, and household maintenance, further limiting their availability for full-time or long-term employment. Consequently, many women are compelled to accept part-time, seasonal, or temporary jobs within the tourism industry, reinforcing their economic vulnerability.

The seasonality of tourism presents both challenges and opportunities for women. On one hand, it allows them to balance employment with household duties; on the other, it results in irregular income, undermining financial security and long-term career prospects. In rural communities where community-based tourism (CBT) initiatives depend on natural resources, protected areas, and cultural heritage, the role of women becomes particularly important. As Corley [12] points out, preserving local cultures and environmental assets is essential for maintaining tourism's economic base. In this context, women's participation in tourism, whether through handicrafts, food production, or hospitality, can significantly shape the sustainability and resilience of local tourism economies.

However, to fully realize the potential of rural tourism as a driver of inclusive development, targeted efforts are necessary to empower women, ensure equal access to entrepreneurial resources, and dismantle the structural barriers limiting their participation in high-value segments of the industry.

2.2. The Role and Contribution of Women's Businesses in Rural Tourism Development

Labor relations have undergone significant transformations in recent years, influenced notably by technological advances that have replaced many jobs, exacerbated unemployment, and reduced traditional employment opportunities. In this context, women's participation in the workforce, especially in traditionally male-dominated sectors such as technology and rural activities, has notably increased, marking substantial progress in gender equality [13]. This shift is often driven by the

economic necessity to supplement household incomes amid high unemployment rates and shrinking earnings.

Historically, rural labor was dominated by men, with women confined to domestic tasks, small-scale animal husbandry, and handicrafts. This division was largely justified by the physical demands of labor and entrenched gender norms, which assigned productive roles to men and reproductive or domestic roles to women [14]. However, modern rural economies have witnessed a restructuring of these roles, with women increasingly engaging in income-generating activities beyond household boundaries, thus challenging traditional gendered divisions of labor [13].

Despite this progress, women's work in rural sectors often remains socially invisible and undervalued, even when they contribute significantly to agriculture and related activities [3]. Economic pressures, including rising living costs and the monetization of rural economies, have further compelled women to participate actively in labor markets [15]. The feminist struggle for gender equality has benefited from these changes, as rural women transition from passive domestic roles to active economic agents, reflecting broader social modernization and globalization trends [16].

Rural areas have increasingly fostered tourism as a sustainable economic alternative, blending traditional agricultural practices with new economic activities. Tourism's multifunctional character offers rural women opportunities to diversify their income sources, reduce social isolation, and enhance their cultural and social capital [7, 17]. This engagement facilitates a redefinition of social and professional identities, as women entrepreneurs integrate agricultural heritage with tourism activities, promoting gender equality and social inclusion within rural labor markets [18].

Although men often retain decision-making power in rural households and production units, rural tourism represents a significant domain where women assert professional and economic influence, contributing to gender equality and rural development [2]. Thus, women-led businesses in rural tourism not only empower women economically but also serve as vital agents of social transformation and identity reconstruction.

2.3. Diversification of Tourism Offerings through Women's Enterprises

The diversification of tourism products and services by women-owned businesses constitutes a pivotal step in enhancing tourism's positive impact and promoting gender equality. By developing a broad spectrum of tourist experiences, including traditional cuisine, local crafts, adventure tourism, cultural events, and nature excursions, women entrepreneurs introduce innovation and freshness into the tourism industry [5]. This diversification caters to varied visitor preferences and enriches the overall tourism experience.

Moreover, women-led enterprises challenge entrenched stereotypes by demonstrating women's capacity to influence community development and foster inclusive environments [19]. Through entrepreneurship, women contribute not only to economic growth but also to cultural sensitivity and social cohesion, helping to improve women's status and roles in rural tourism sectors.

The economic empowerment derived from diversified tourism activities enhances women's visibility and leadership, inspiring further female participation in the industry. This process strengthens local economies while simultaneously supporting cultural preservation and expanding tourists' perspectives across destinations [20]. Hence, diversification driven by women's businesses plays a crucial role in sustaining rural tourism, fostering social inclusion, and promoting gender equality.

2.4. Promotion of Local Culture and Handicrafts by Women-Led Businesses

In a rapidly globalizing world marked by accelerated technological advancement and cultural interconnectivity, the preservation and promotion of local culture and handicrafts remain critical for sustaining a community's cultural identity. Women-led businesses play a pivotal role in this endeavor, simultaneously fostering cultural heritage and generating economic opportunities for their communities and themselves [8].

Women entrepreneurs engaged in the production and commercialization of artisanal goods contribute significantly to the safeguarding and revitalization of cultural heritage at risk of extinction. By producing culturally significant handicrafts tied to local history and traditions, they facilitate cultural continuity and community pride. Moreover, these businesses foster economic development by creating employment opportunities in production, packaging, marketing, and sales, thereby increasing household incomes and regional economic growth [5].

Beyond economic impact, promoting local culture through women-led businesses enhances cultural awareness among community members and tourists alike. This heightened awareness nurtures respect for local heritage and supports cultural sustainability. Furthermore, cultural tourism and unique experiential offerings emerge as direct outcomes, with women entrepreneurs attracting tourists interested in authentic cultural engagement through artisanal products and related activities.

Strengthening social networks is another crucial dimension, as women entrepreneurs collaborate with artisans and peers, fostering solidarity and shared cultural identity. Strategies for promotion typically include creating unique products embodying local cultural values, drawing inspiration from historical events, leveraging local artisan expertise, and employing modern technology and marketing tools [13].

Women-led businesses thus provide essential contributions to cultural preservation and enrichment by fostering deep community and tourist connections. Utilizing diverse channels such as local markets, cultural festivals, specialized retail, and digital platforms, they expand reach and cultural appreciation. Educational initiatives, including workshops and presentations, further engage communities and visitors, reinforcing the value of local culture and handicrafts. Success in this sector requires entrepreneurial vision and commitment to cultural identity, enabling these businesses to positively impact both the local community and cultural tourism development [21].

2.5. Factors Influencing Women's Adaptation in Rural Tourism

Rural tourism offers a vital pathway for empowering women's labor participation, intersecting with their involvement in diverse rural activities such as livestock care, agriculture, household management, forestry, and small-scale retail. However, women are often perceived as a passive workforce in rural tourism due to multiple socio-economic and cultural barriers limiting their full potential [9].

Analyses across micro, meso, and macro levels reveal intersecting constraints and enablers affecting women's participation. Micro-level factors encompass individual attributes such as gender stereotypes, education, language skills, physical condition, family background, and personal autonomy, all influencing strategic engagement in rural tourism. At the meso-level, family dynamics, particularly domestic workload and family support, play critical roles. Women frequently bear disproportionate household responsibilities, especially in regions like Asia, where eldercare and childcare duties intensify time constraints. Consequently, many women receive minimal familial support, constrained by traditional expectations that prioritize domestic roles over economic participation. Macro-level factors involve national policies, economic conditions, and cultural norms that frame women's societal roles and opportunities in rural tourism [5].

Empirical research highlights multidimensional benefits of rural tourism for women's empowerment, including psychological, social, political, and economic improvements. Nevertheless, entrenched socio-cultural structures often limit women's capacity to capitalize fully on economic activities such as agriculture, animal husbandry, food processing, handicrafts, and apiculture, thereby restricting their tourism sector involvement. Studies from Pakistan and India reveal practical barriers, including financial constraints, inadequate infrastructure, and limited community participation, which disproportionately affect women's engagement in tourism development [7].

Financial support emerges as a decisive factor influencing women's participation. Insufficient access to funding restricts their ability to invest in education, training, artisanal production, and rural accommodations. Employment conditions also tend to disadvantage women compared to men, with wage disparities and unpaid labor reinforcing gender inequality in rural tourism sectors [20]. The

initial capital requirement for tourism-related enterprises frequently acts as a deterrent, limiting women's entrepreneurial ambitions and market entry.

Studies such as Dukerich, et al. [21] in Serbian rural contexts confirm that inadequate investment and financing modalities hinder rural tourism development. Women entrepreneurs consistently report a greater need for financial support than their male counterparts. Research in Spain further underscores finance as a significant obstacle to female entrepreneurship in tourism, exacerbated by bureaucratic complexities in business licensing and regulatory compliance.

Socio-cultural environment, particularly patriarchal norms, further constrains women's decision-making power and social mobility, sustaining gender-based subordination in both private and public spheres. These systemic factors collectively shape women's adaptation and empowerment within rural tourism, underscoring the necessity of integrated policy interventions and community support to dismantle barriers and foster inclusive rural tourism development.

3. Methodology and Research Methods

This study aims to analyze the contributions of women-led businesses to rural tourism development in Krushë e Madhe. To achieve this objective, both primary and secondary data were collected and analyzed. Primary data were gathered through a structured questionnaire employing a quantitative (numerical) research approach, while secondary data were derived from a comprehensive review of academic books, peer-reviewed articles, and reports related to tourism development, tourists' perceptions, and experiences [22].

Quantitative research is defined as a systematic investigation of phenomena through the collection of numerical data and the application of statistical, mathematical, or computational techniques [23]. Rooted in the positivist paradigm, quantitative research emphasizes statistical inference, hypothesis testing, experimental and quasi-experimental designs, and structured instruments such as questionnaires with closed-ended questions and Likert scales to ensure reliable measurement and generalizability of results.

The research adopts an exploratory study design, which is particularly suited for investigating under-researched topics without the expectation of providing definitive solutions. Exploratory research facilitates the generation of new ideas, hypotheses, and baseline information, thus informing subsequent studies [22]. Given the limited prior studies on women's entrepreneurship and rural tourism in Krushë e Madhe, this approach enables an initial, in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

Additionally, this study employs an inductive reasoning approach to develop new theoretical insights based on empirical observations. Inductive reasoning progresses from specific observations to broader generalizations, contrasting with deductive reasoning, which tests existing theories [23]. Combining inductive and deductive methods allows a comprehensive exploration of the research questions.

The primary data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire consisting of 15 closed-ended items measured on a five-point Likert scale. This instrument was designed to capture diverse perspectives on the role of women-led businesses in the development of rural tourism in Krushë e Madhe. The questionnaire items were developed based on the research objectives and relevant literature.

Before administering the questionnaire, respondents were informed about the study's purpose, assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and given the option to withdraw at any time without penalty. Additionally, pilot testing was conducted to ensure question clarity and reliability, enabling adjustments before full deployment.

The questionnaire was administered exclusively to women entrepreneurs actively engaged in rural businesses within Krushë e Madhe.

The study population comprised women entrepreneurs operating businesses in Krushë e Madhe. Due to the absence of official statistical data on the number of women-owned businesses in the region,

preliminary information was obtained directly from local women entrepreneurs, identifying a total population size of 107 individuals.

Using the sampling formula, a representative sample size was calculated to ensure adequate precision at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. The calculation is presented as follows:

$$n = \frac{\chi^2 \cdot N \cdot P(1 - P)}{e^2(N - 1) + \chi^2 \cdot P(1 - P)}$$

Where:

- $\chi^2=2.034$ (Chi-square value for 1 degree of freedom at 95% confidence).
- $N=107$ (Population size).
- $P=0.5$ (Population proportion, assumed maximum variability).
- $e=0.05$ (Margin of error).

3.1. Substituting the Values

$$n = \frac{2.034 \times 107 \times 0.5 \times 0.5}{0.05^2 \times (107 - 1) + 2.034 \times 0.5 \times 0.5} = 29$$

Consequently, a sample of 29 women entrepreneurs was selected through simple random sampling to ensure the representativeness of the study.

Quantitative data collected via questionnaires were coded and entered into IBM SPSS Statistics software for analysis. The data were initially screened for completeness and validity. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were computed to summarize the demographic and business characteristics of the respondents.

Inferential statistical techniques were applied to test the research hypotheses and examine relationships among variables. Tabular presentations were employed to facilitate the interpretation of findings according to the study's objectives.

4. Results

This section presents the empirical findings based on data collected from 29 women entrepreneurs in Krushē e Madhe. The results are summarized through key tables and figures that highlight the respondents' demographic profiles, challenges in business development, and their contributions to rural tourism. Visual aids are provided below with concise descriptions of the main findings.

The results in Table 1 indicate that the study had 29 participants. The youngest age was 27 years, while the oldest was 63 years. The average age was 47.2414 years with a standard deviation of 8.60. These data suggest a relatively moderate variation in the ages of the participants, with the mean being close to the middle of the range and the standard deviation being relatively small, indicating a low deviation from the average.

Table 1.
Age of Respondents.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	29	27.00	63.00	47.2414	8.60504

Table 2 presents the respondents' work experience in the study. The number of participants was 29. The minimum work experience was 1 year, while the maximum was 15 years. The average work experience was 8.0690 years with a standard deviation of 4.19124. These data indicate that the respondents have varying levels of work experience, with a relatively high average and a moderate standard deviation, suggesting a medium level of dispersion in the values.

Table 2.

Work Experience of Respondents.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Work Experience (years)	29	1.00	15.00	8.0690	4.19124

The results of the analysis in Figure 1 show that the majority of responses to the question “Have you encountered difficulties due to lack of start-up capital in your efforts to build a business in Kruše e Madhe?” involve some degree of financial challenge. For 82.8% of participants, difficulties related to lack of start-up capital for business development are an ongoing issue, while 17.2% of participants indicated that they encountered difficulties of this type frequently.

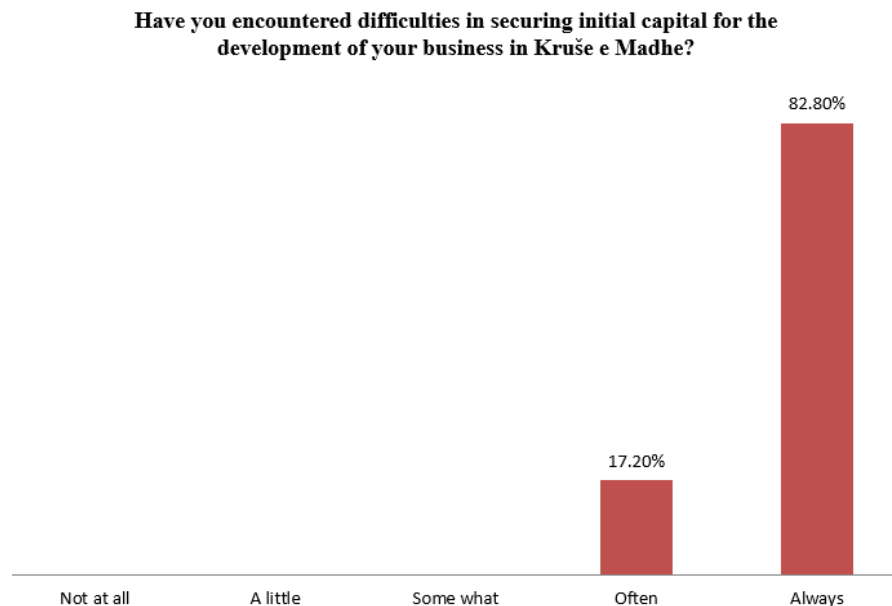


Figure 1.

Difficulties in Securing Initial Capital.

Presentation of cultural traditions in Figure 2, 72.4% of respondents believe that the presentation of cultural traditions by women has influenced the increase in the number of tourists in Kruše e Madhe. This shows that a large majority of women appreciate the role of the presentation of cultural heritage in attracting tourists.

Have you ever experienced limitations in obtaining financial support for your business development from external sources?

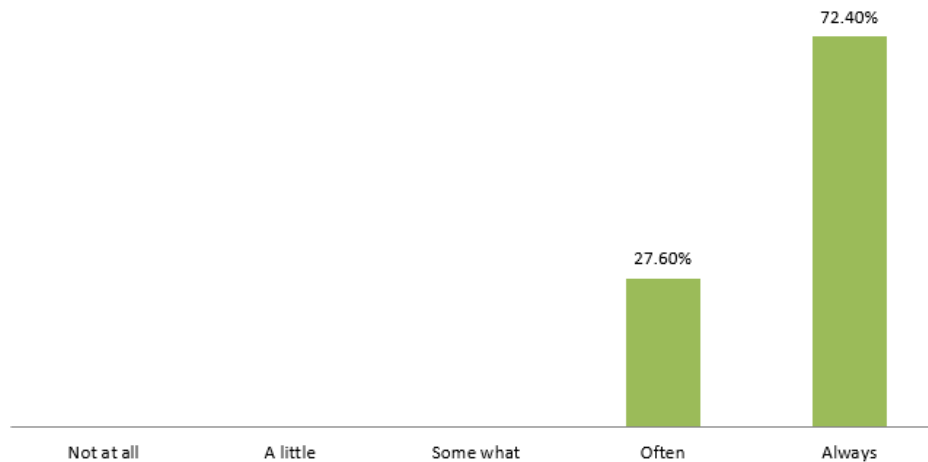


Figure 2.
Presentation of Cultural Traditions.

Table 3 analyzes responses on key indicators related to women's roles in rural tourism. Among the indicators tested, the barrier associated with exporting local products showed statistical significance ($F = 3.376$, $p = 0.014$); other variables, such as contribution to accommodation services, participation in agricultural activities, cultural presentation, social/professional identity change, and changing societal perceptions, did not reach statistical significance ($p > 0.05$).

While most measures showed relatively uniform perceptions among groups, the significant effect for export barriers suggests variability in how women experience external market challenges, reinforcing that limited access to export opportunities constitutes a notable barrier to business development.

Table 3.
ANOVA Analysis for Selected Variables.

Variable	F-Statistic	Significance (p-value)
Barriers to exporting local products	3.376	0.014
Participation in agricultural activities	2.261	0.067
Changing societal perceptions	2.102	0.085
Contribution to accommodation services	1.074	0.443
Cultural tradition promotion	0.745	0.700
Identity transformation	1.386	0.270

These findings collectively confirm that women in Krushë e Madhe face significant financial barriers, particularly regarding startup capital and export opportunities, yet contribute strongly to cultural preservation and tourism attractiveness. The overall results substantiate the study's hypotheses regarding the multifaceted challenges and contributions of women-led businesses in the rural tourism sector.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the role of women in rural enterprise development and tourism in Krushë e Madhe, Kosovo. The results confirm that women are actively engaged in various types of small-scale economic activities, including agriculture, artisanal production, local commerce, and tourism-related services. These findings align with existing literature highlighting

women's vital contributions to rural economies and the diversification of income sources at the community level.

Women's participation in entrepreneurial activities in Krushë e Madhe mirrors broader global and regional trends of increasing female involvement in rural enterprise. Such engagement not only reflects the socioeconomic empowerment of women but also plays a critical role in promoting inclusive and sustainable local development. Their contributions are particularly visible in sectors such as agritourism, where they help preserve and present cultural heritage while generating family income.

However, the study also reveals that women entrepreneurs face substantial structural and systemic barriers. A large portion of respondents reported difficulties in securing initial capital and accessing financial support, consistent with previous research that identifies limited financial inclusion as a major obstacle for women in rural areas. These financial constraints hinder business growth and restrict opportunities for innovation and expansion.

Cultural norms remain another significant barrier. The data show that traditional gender roles and societal expectations still influence women's perceived and actual participation in business. This supports previous studies emphasizing the need to challenge entrenched gender norms to create an enabling environment for female entrepreneurship in rural settings.

Furthermore, access to local markets poses a continuing challenge. Women entrepreneurs often lack adequate platforms and logistical support to commercialize their products and services effectively. This limits both their business scalability and the broader economic impact of their ventures. Enhancing digital infrastructure, local trade networks, and community-based tourism cooperatives could be transformative in this regard.

In terms of tourism development, women in Krushë e Madhe contribute notably to rural tourism by offering hospitality services, producing local foods, and presenting cultural practices to visitors. These contributions increase the attractiveness of the area as a rural tourism destination and offer authentic experiences rooted in local traditions. Literature in rural tourism emphasizes the significance of such grassroots involvement in building sustainable tourism models that benefit both hosts and visitors.

When compared with similar studies in the Western Balkans and elsewhere, the findings from Krushë e Madhe are largely consistent with established patterns but also reflect unique local socio-economic dynamics. While many of the observed barriers are common across contexts, the degree of resilience and creativity shown by women in Krushë e Madhe underscores the need for localized policy responses. Empowering rural women through targeted financial programs, capacity-building initiatives, and inclusive governance frameworks would not only enhance their economic role but also strengthen the sustainability of rural tourism in the region.

Future research should further explore the intersectionality of gender, geography, and economic participation in rural areas. Comparative studies across municipalities or regions would help determine whether the challenges and opportunities identified in this study are specific to Krushë e Madhe or indicative of broader national trends. In-depth qualitative investigations could also shed light on women's lived experiences and aspirations, thereby informing more nuanced and context-specific development strategies.

6. Conclusions

This study has highlighted the multifaceted role of women-led businesses in advancing rural tourism in Krushë e Madhe, underscoring both their contributions and the systemic challenges they encounter. The findings illuminate the broader socio-economic dynamics of rural entrepreneurship, particularly the interplay between gender, economic participation, and sustainable tourism development. Women in this region are not only economic actors but also cultural stewards whose initiatives enhance the authenticity and attractiveness of the local tourism offer.

The research contributes to the academic discourse by providing empirical evidence from a rural setting often underrepresented in scholarly literature. It offers a context-sensitive understanding of the barriers's women face, such as constrained access to capital, limited market integration, and the

persistence of restrictive social norms, and reveals how these obstacles hinder their full participation in the rural economy.

While this study centers on Krushë e Madhe, its implications extend to other rural contexts in the Western Balkans and beyond, where similar structural and cultural dynamics may prevail. The results suggest the need for more inclusive development models and policy interventions that recognize and amplify the agency of women entrepreneurs. Moreover, the findings call for integrative approaches that combine economic empowerment with community-based tourism and local heritage preservation.

Future research should delve deeper into the longitudinal impact of women's entrepreneurship on rural resilience, social cohesion, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Comparative studies across different municipalities or countries could further enrich the understanding of best practices and contextual variables that shape women's economic empowerment in rural tourism sectors. Supporting women-led initiatives in rural tourism is not only a matter of equity but a strategic imperative for sustainable development and cultural continuity in rural areas.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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