



Advancing Women's Economic Empowerment in the Tourism Sector in COVID-19 Response and Recovery

Photo: UN Women/Pornvit Visitoran

SUMMARY

This brief explores the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's economic empowerment in the tourism sector. The restrictions of movement applied as a response to the pandemic all but destroyed the global tourism industry. This has disproportionately affected women due to the industry's pre-existing gender inequalities and women's predominance in the sector's workforce. This brief examines emerging research and data on these impacts; identifies innovative responses to these challenges across regions; and makes concrete recommendations for action by different stakeholders to ensure that women's economic empowerment is central to the COVID-19 response and recovery in the tourism sector.

COVID-19 IMPACTS ON TOURISM

The economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic is still being calculated. The World Bank reports that the global economy is set to stage a robust post-recession recovery, with global growth expected to reach 5.6 per cent in 2021. However, this global figure is largely based on China and the United States, with predictions for uneven recovery between emerging market and developing economies. For example, in low-income countries, where vaccination has lagged, growth has been revised lower to 2.9 per cent. Fragile and conflict-affected low-income economies have been the hardest hit by the pandemic and per capita income gains have been set back by at least a decade.¹ Global income will still be some US\$3 trillion less by the end of 2022 than anticipated before the crisis hit.²

In 2019, the tourism sector contributed 10.4 per cent to global GDP; a share which decreased to 5.5 per cent in 2020 due to ongoing restrictions to mobility. In 2020, 62 million jobs were lost, representing a drop of 18.5 per cent, leaving just 272 million employed across the sector globally, compared to 334 million in 2019. The threat of job losses persists as many jobs are currently supported by government retention schemes and reduced hours, without which full recovery of tourism could be lost. Domestic visitor spending decreased

by 45 per cent, while international visitor spending declined by an unprecedented 69.4 per cent.³ The figure below shows how this dynamic affected world regions, with the Caribbean and Asia and the Pacific worst hit in terms of GDP, and Africa and North America losing the largest proportion of jobs.

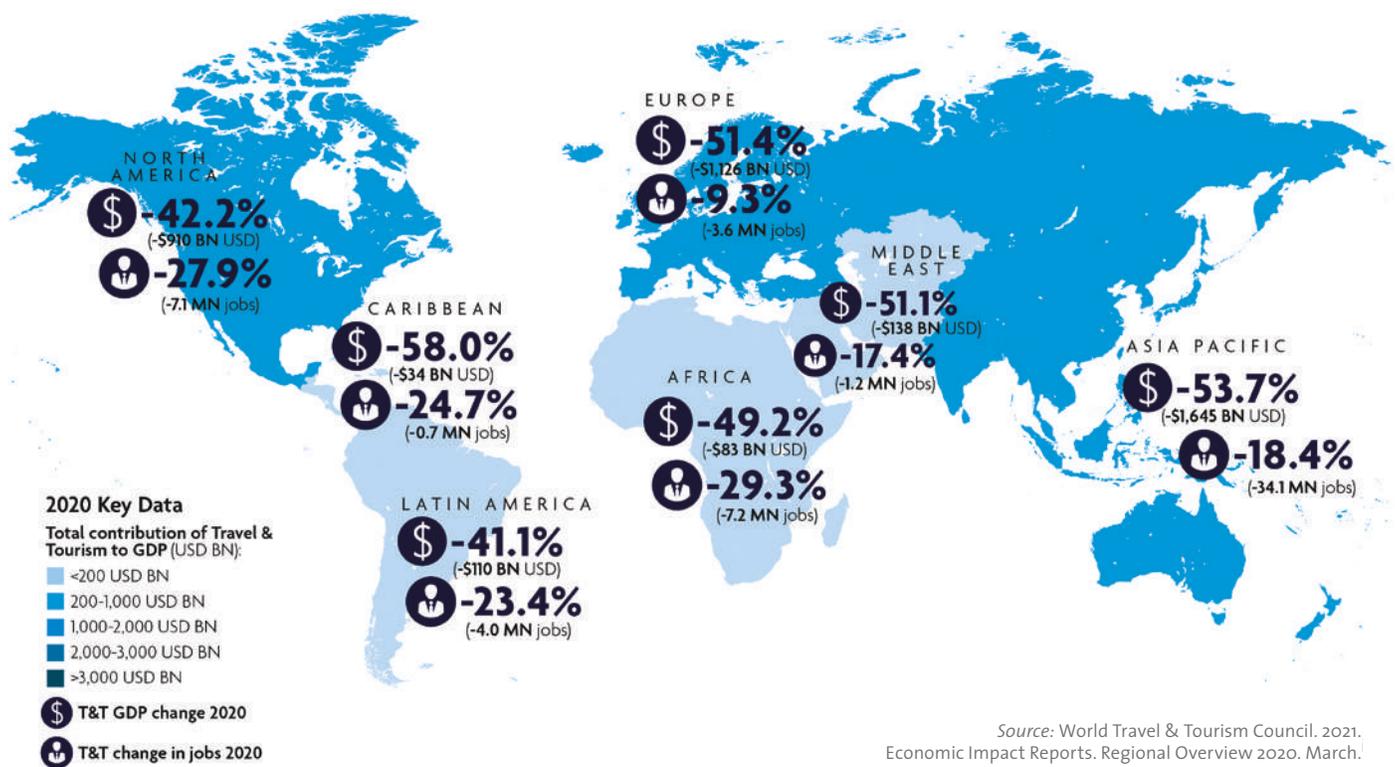
The collapse in international tourism represents an estimated **loss of US\$1.3 trillion in export revenues**—more than 11 times the loss recorded during the 2009 global economic crisis. Most experts do not see a return to pre-pandemic levels happening before 2023. The crisis has put between **100 and 120 million direct tourism jobs at risk**, many of them in small and medium-sized enterprises.⁴ Modelled projections by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) predict that the crash of the international tourism sector could cause a **loss of more than US\$4 trillion to the global GDP** for the years 2020 and 2021. This reduction in tourism has caused a **5.5 per cent rise in unemployment of unskilled labour** on average, depending on the importance of the sector for the economy.⁵ In addition, much work in tourism is seasonal and located in the informal economy or carried out by unpaid family members.⁶ As such, these figures do not necessarily reflect the magnitude of lost jobs and income in the tourism sector.

Tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes. These people are called visitors (which may be either tourists or excursionists; residents or non-residents) and tourism has to do with their activities, some of which involve tourism expenditure.

The **tourism sector** is made up of a number of industries, such as accommodation; food and beverage serving; passenger transport (railway, road, water, air); transport equipment rental; travel agencies and other reservation services; cultural activities; sports and recreation activities; retail trade of country-specific tourism characteristic goods; and other country-specific tourism characteristic activities.

In general, **women's employment** is concentrated in accommodation, food and beverage serving activities, air passenger transport and travel agencies. However, as highlighted in the *Global Report on Women in Tourism*, data are not currently collected for these industries, apart from in European Union (EU) countries, so the International Labour Organization (ILO) category “accommodation and food services” is used as a proxy.

Sources: UNWTO. “Glossary of Tourism Terms.” Accessed 1 December 2021, and UNWTO. 2020. [Methodological Notes to the Tourism Statistics Database, 2020 Edition](#).



Source: World Travel & Tourism Council. 2021. Economic Impact Reports. Regional Overview 2020. March.

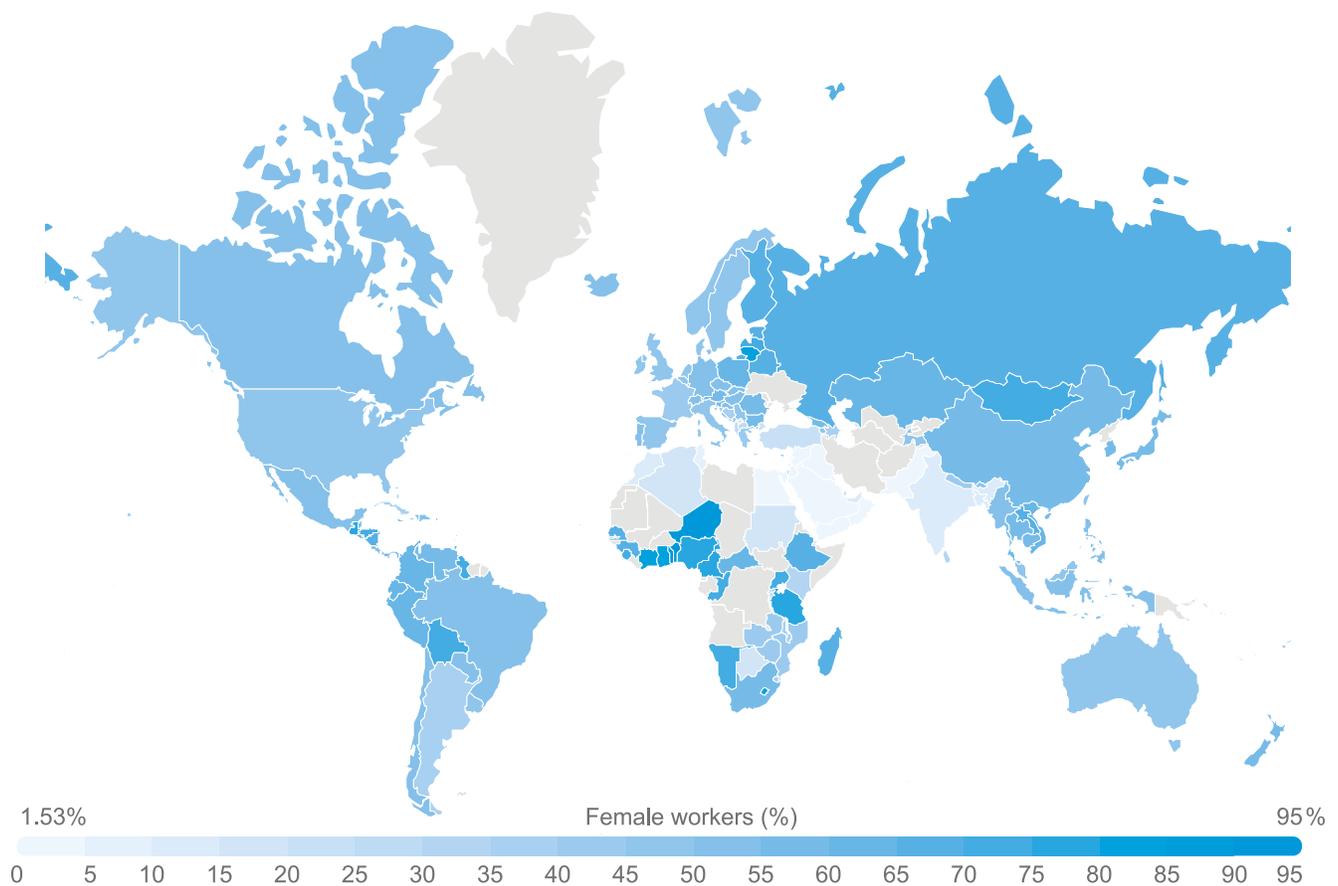
IMPACTS ON WOMEN AND GIRLS

As set out in the UN Women Policy Brief, [Addressing the Economic Fallout Of COVID-19: Pathways and Policy Options for a Gender-Responsive Recovery](#) (2021), decades of research by feminist economists have made it clear that crises are not gender neutral.⁷ Women’s work and livelihoods are often particularly affected during times of crisis, as their access to income is less secure; the majority of women’s work (58 per cent) is in the informal economy with little or no social protection; and they have less access to finance and technology.

The COVID-19 crisis cost women around the world at least US\$800 billion in lost income in 2020, equivalent to more than the combined GDP of 98 countries. Globally, women lost more than 64 million jobs in 2020—a 5 per cent loss, compared to a 3.9 per cent loss for men. This can partly be attributed to the impact of the pandemic on women-dominated sectors and the explosion of additional unpaid care work shouldered by women due to discriminatory gender roles and the stress on already weak health and care systems,

as set out in more detail in the UN Women Policy Brief, [COVID-19 and the Care Economy](#) (2021). Moreover, this figure does not take into account wages lost by women working in the informal economy. The impact of this economic crisis means that an additional 47 million women worldwide are expected to fall into extreme poverty, living on less than US\$1.90 a day in 2021.⁸ According to the World Economic Forum, the length of time to close **the global gender gap has increased by a generation from 99.5 years to 135.6 years due to negative outcomes for women in 2020.**⁹

These patterns are **amplified in the tourism sector, where women comprise the majority of the workforce and are often concentrated in low-skilled or informal work with less access to social protection.**¹⁰ Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 54 per cent of the global tourism workforce was made up of women, with large variation between countries. This is illustrated on the map below which represents the proportion of the tourism workforce that are women, using 2018 data.¹²



Source: UNWTO, Global Report on Women in Tourism, data from ILOSTAT 2018.¹¹

The lack of sex-disaggregated data and gender statistics makes it difficult to assess the specific impacts of the pandemic on women’s employment and self-employment in tourism. Governments urgently need to increase efforts to collect and analyse such data in partnership with the private sector. Nevertheless, examples from various countries and regions help to shed light on the extent of the pandemic’s economic fallout on women in the tourism sector.

In many countries, women’s employment in tourism has been higher than in the overall economy; for example, in Mozambique (25.5 per cent higher than in the overall workforce) and the Czech Republic (8.9 per cent higher).¹³ For countries with high women’s labour force participation in tourism, the impact on women of the economic fallout from the pandemic is likely to be more sharply felt than in countries where women are less concentrated in the tourism sector. Before the pandemic, women in Australia held around 55 per cent of all jobs, both part-time and full-time, in the sector. By the end of 2020, they held 53 per cent of all jobs and 52 per cent of full-time jobs in the sector. A review of

the annual loss of jobs in the sector showed there has been some recovery for both men and women in part-time jobs. However, the **loss of full-time jobs** for women in the tourism sector is getting worse.¹⁴

Women’s participation in tourism is often concentrated in low-paid, seasonal work at the lower levels of employment. A good deal of women’s work in the sector also takes place in the informal economy, such as handicrafts and food production, and many women work as “contributing family workers” in family tourism enterprises. In **India**, many women workers are part of the homestay industry in various tourism destinations. However, due to the domestic and caring nature of this labour, their **work is often invisible**, and women rarely have financial control of these businesses. While homestays are usually registered under the Ministry of Tourism, women’s labour is not recognized within these businesses and women have therefore **not been taken into consideration for relief packages**.¹⁵

This trend can be seen more broadly across the tourism sector as a whole, as women workers, often migrants, tend to work in an informal or seasonal manner, and as such do not feature in official statistics of the labour department or tourism industry data. This highlights the need to conduct robust gender analysis when developing tourism policy in the COVID-19 recovery, as many aspects of women's work in tourism are made invisible, unpaid or underpaid.

Considering the high levels of dependency on the tourism sector in **Small Island Developing States (SIDS)** and the dominance of women in tourism employment, especially in low-skilled activities, economic contraction of tourism to SIDS is likely to **hit women hardest with job losses**. For example, women have the highest share of employment in the food and beverage service sectors in the Dominican Republic, Kiribati, Mauritius and Tonga. In contrast, in relatively high-skilled tourism activities such as travel agencies and tour operators, women make up a lower proportion of the workforce in SIDS. While the impact on women in the tourism industry in SIDS has been disproportionate, the COVID-19 response has lacked an explicit gender dimension. Many SIDS have introduced fiscal or monetary measures targeting the tourism sector; however, few have included an explicit gender component.¹⁶ In addition to their high dependence on the tourism sector, SIDS are similarly vulnerable to climate risks and crises. Considering the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women in tourism, and the fact that women are more vulnerable to the risks and effects of climate change, it is essential that COVID-19 recovery efforts take into account the relationships between gender, sustainable tourism and climate change, and ensure policy coherence.

The pandemic has contributed to record unemployment, extreme poverty, and financial uncertainty and stress. All around the world, this situation, coupled with mobility restrictions and lockdowns, has led to a **drastic increase in domestic and other violence against women and girls**.¹⁷ As reported by the Commonwealth Secretariat, this shadow pandemic of violence against women has significantly increased in the **Caribbean** where the tourism sector has been blighted by the pandemic. In the Bahamas, for example, 70 per cent of GDP comes from tourism, placing not only women's employment, but their safety and well-being at risk.¹⁸ This issue is not only related to the domestic sphere, as the impact of travel and mobility restrictions has made public spaces less safe for women and girls with empty streets and public transit. Restrictive measures affect women

workers and entrepreneurs in the tourism sector, as travelling to and from their places of work, and carrying out their business activities, carries an elevated risk. Evidence in some countries already shows that increased reports of domestic violence have continued after the lockdown period¹⁹ and thus may have longer-term impacts on women's safety, both within the domestic realm and in public spaces, including as tourists and tourism workers.

“A gender-responsive approach to the COVID-19 crisis is essential across the whole of society to ensure that gender inequalities are not reproduced, perpetuated or exacerbated in the context of this pandemic. This includes in workplaces, through healthcare provision and research, and in preventing violence towards women and girls.”

Source: International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF). 2020. [“IUF COVID-19 Demands: Equality.”](#)

Taken together, these data and selected examples show the **devastating and multifaceted impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in the tourism sector, revealing already existing discriminatory gender practices within the sector and ongoing challenges to gender equality and women's rights to and at work.**

PUTTING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AT THE CENTRE OF RECOVERY

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) [Global Report on Women in Tourism – Second Edition](#) (2019) highlights how women's participation in the tourism sector can contribute to economic empowerment and gender equality in five key areas: employment; entrepreneurship; education and training; leadership, policy and decision-making; and community and civil society.

However, as set out in the UNWTO report, achieving these goals was already difficult before the pandemic. **Unless concrete actions are taken, the post-COVID-19 era will be even more challenging for securing women's economic empowerment in the tourism sector.**²¹ The recovery of the tourism sector and COVID-19 recovery present an opportunity to “build back better” and “build forward”, with women's economic empowerment as a central focus.

A number of emerging good practices by the public sector, private sector and multi-stakeholder partnerships are highlighted below. These examples demonstrate the kinds of concrete actions that can be taken across the five thematic areas specifically within the COVID-19 response and recovery.

EMPLOYMENT

A key challenge for women's economic empowerment in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic includes the widespread job losses caused by the collapse of the tourism sector. There are also concerns around the retrenching of gender stereotypes in tourism employment, and the halting of measures to promote gender equality across the sector. Women's ability to balance work and domestic responsibilities has also been strained by the increase in care and domestic work and the lack of supportive and flexible employment policies and care infrastructure.

In **Nepal**, the 3 Sisters Adventure Trekking company trains young women to become trekking guides in the mountains

of Nepal. When the nationwide lockdown hit and the company was unable to operate, they provided cash relief of US\$100 to temporary staff members to help them return to their homes. Permanent staff members were provided with a minimum flat salary of US\$50 per month, enough to at least enable them to pay their rent. The company has helped staff who were infected with COVID, providing funds for counselling and making necessary arrangements. The company has also used this time to conduct virtual monitoring and evaluation, which will support its efforts in developing and employing women trekking guides as the tourism sector recovers.²²

In the **United States**, Airbnb expanded its benefits for employees in response to COVID-19, providing additional days of well-being and emergency time off; two coordinated companywide days off; and new working norms and manager expectations to allow for more flexible work. Following these actions, in 2021, Airbnb was recognized as “[Leading on Leave](#)” by the National Partnership for Women & Families, an advocacy group dedicated to advancing key policies for women and families.²³

Intrepid Travel, a signatory to the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPS²⁴) since 2017, works with more than 1,250 staff of about 65 nationalities, based in more than 40 offices around the world from its headquarters in **Australia**. Close to 60 per cent are women. In response to the changing needs of their workforce, particularly during the pandemic, Intrepid introduced a flexible work policy to allow staff to set their own hours and choose a work schedule that suits them, fulfilling a desire to balance home life and work and be global rather than localized. Considering its women-dominated workforce, this policy has allowed for the retention of women staff during the pandemic, in contrast with the many companies which did not respond to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women staff due to increased care responsibilities.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Women entrepreneurs in tourism have been hit twofold: by the reduction in the direct provision of goods and services to tourists and the drastically reduced demand from tourism supply chains. Significant initiatives have been taken in the public and private sector for a gender-responsive recovery and to support women entrepreneurs in the tourism sector. These measures include continued provision of skills development opportunities, facilitating market access, wage subsidies, tax cuts and exemptions, increased access to finance, interest rate subsidies and reduction of social security contributions.

In **South Africa**, all State Departments are required to comply with the Gender-Responsive Planning, Budgeting,

Monitoring, Evaluation and Auditing Framework (GRPBMEA). Under this framework, the South African Department of Tourism is required to ensure that women's empowerment and gender equality are at the centre of policy priorities, results-based planning, budgeting and accountability. Key activities by the Department of Tourism to promote women's empowerment include the *Women in Tourism (WiT) Programme*, a three-year pilot programme implemented in collaboration with UNWTO in the Limpopo province, which is the second most impoverished province in the country but has significant tourism potential. This project has continued during the COVID-19 pandemic as much as possible and will be expanded into a larger-scale project as part of tourism recovery in South Africa.



Source: Global Report on Women in Tourism.²⁰

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the WIT Programme ran a series of webinars on skills development to support women tourism entrepreneurs. These included sessions on social media, technical support, wellness and tech-savvy businesses. The programme supports tourism authorities to work substantively on women's economic empowerment in the sector, developing targeted policies and programmes, and ensuring continuing support for them during the pandemic. The South African example demonstrates what can be achieved when gender mainstreaming is mandated from the highest level of government.

Currently piloted in **Mexico**, the UNWTO *Weaving the Recovery – Indigenous Women in Tourism* project, is aimed at enabling the market access of indigenous women to tourism and conscious consumers through textiles, fair trade and community entrepreneurship. The project builds on indigenous women's ancestral knowledge and skills in traditional textiles, enhancing their capacities to participate in the recovery of the tourism sector.²⁵ A training toolkit aims to build digital skills for women to access online markets to sell their products. After Mexico, this project will be implemented in other countries of the Latin American region.

In addition to these programmatic measures to support women entrepreneurs in the tourism sector, a number of governments have enacted policy measures to sustain tourism workers and help them recover from the effects of the pandemic. Many of these measures are gender-responsive and either directly target women recipients or are beneficial to women in countries where they make up the majority of tourism small-business owners.

In **Argentina**, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports launched a **support fund to subsidize wages** for tourist service providers (*Fondo de Auxilio para Prestadores Turísticos*) in June 2020. Monthly payments are available for small, independent service providers who offer complementary tourist services

In **Paraguay**, the Ministry of Women's Affairs submitted a request to the Banco Nacional de Fomento and the Crédito Agrícola de Habilidadación for special attention to women entrepreneurs in the tourism sector, **making requirements more flexible and creating a specific line of credit**.²⁸

In **Poland**, where women are twice as likely as men to work in accommodation and food services, COVID-19 response policies aim to ensure that companies have sufficient liquidity to maintain their activities by providing support to tour operators and other workers active in tourism and culture. Measures include **direct grants, interest rate subsidies and reduction of social security contributions**.²⁹

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The suspension of in-person learning has had a significant effect on the training and education of women in tourism, particularly for those in hard-to-reach communities or without access to digital technologies. In addition to leadership and skills training for women in tourism, gender equality training programmes for tourism representatives in the public and private sectors lead to greater outcomes for gender equality. A number of companies and governments have stepped up efforts to fill this gap in education and training caused by the pandemic.

The *Santander BEST Africa* programme from Banco Santander aims to maintain the continuity of women's tourism businesses throughout the pandemic, providing training, exchange and shared learning, technical assistance, market access, improved use of technologies, and financing for activities linked to sustainable tourism in selected destinations. The Banco Santander Foundation estimates its aid will help create or maintain jobs for up to 1,300 women and train at least 700 women by the end of 2021. It will make a first contribution of EUR 500,000 for the first three years of the programme, which is running in **Gambia, Senegal** and

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