

## EMPOWERING WOMEN IN RURAL MONTENEGRO: A PATHWAY TO SUSTAINABLE RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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**Abstract:** The research posits that empowered women are crucial to rural tourism and sustainable rural development, as they embody strength and decisiveness in their engagement. Women are identified as the foundational element of rural tourism, entrepreneurship, and overall rural development. The study aims to reach and empower women in rural areas, highlighting the challenges they face and promoting positive outcomes for their communities. Two surveys were conducted: among women entrepreneurs in rural tourism (41) as well as among tourists, users of rural tourism (228). A factor analysis was performed, which separated 3 factors, as well as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which tested cause-effect relationships between them. The results of the first research among women entrepreneurs in rural tourism showed that women are drawn to rural tourism for sustainable income opportunities, economic diversification, and the chance to take on leadership roles and make decisions within their communities. The results of the second research reveals that guests who enjoy rural tourism in Montenegro highly value Unique Experiences, Authenticity, and Sustainability. These factors are interconnected, with strong relationships indicating that enhancing unique experiences can also promote authenticity and sustainability. By focusing on these key areas and leveraging the strong relationships between them, it can be concluded that rural tourism is a sustainable form of tourism, which strongly predisposes women to engage in rural tourism. It is a cause-and-effect relationship, because by engaging in tourism, women are empowered. A satisfied woman is the foundation of a healthy family, which is, in every sense, a pledge of a sustainable future.

**Keywords:** sustainability, women entrepreneurship, empowerment, rural development, rural tourism, Montenegro

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### INTRODUCTION

The empowerment of women in rural tourism carries significant benefits, not just for the individuals involved but also for the broader community. According to Vujko et al. (2024a), women who operate small-scale bed-and-breakfast establishments often source their ingredients from local farmers, fostering a network of economic interdependence that strengthens community ties. Furthermore, the social empowerment of women through entrepreneurship enhances their roles within their communities, allowing them to become decision-makers and leaders (Zeng & Magazzino, 2024; Zhang et al., 2025). This shift fosters a culture of collaboration and resilience, where women support one another in their ventures. Importantly, female entrepreneurs are also more likely to prioritize sustainable tourism practices (Schianetz & Kavanagh, 2008; Addai et al., 2024), such as responsible resource management and conservation initiatives, as they often possess a deep-rooted connection to their environment (Bojović et al., 2024).

Despite the promising landscape of female entrepreneurship in rural tourism (Regmi et al., 2023), significant challenges persist that hinder women's full participation in this sector. Access to funding and financial resources remains a formidable barrier, as women often encounter difficulties in securing loans or investment due to a lack of collateral or financial literacy (Chen & Barcus, 2024). Societal and cultural barriers further exacerbate these challenges, with traditional gender roles and stereotypes discouraging women from pursuing entrepreneurial endeavors (Sutrisno et al., 2024).

In many rural areas, the expectation for women to prioritize family responsibilities over professional aspirations can limit their opportunities for growth and success (Sahrakorpi & Bandi, 2021). Additionally, the scarcity of training and support networks tailored to women in tourism poses a significant obstacle. Without mentorship or access to skill development programs, many aspiring female entrepreneurs may struggle to navigate the complexities of establishing and managing a business (De Groot et al., 2017). Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that encompasses financial support, educational initiatives, and community engagement to foster an environment where women can thrive as entrepreneurs in rural tourism (Kitole & Genda, 2024).

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The empowerment of women in tourism entrepreneurship can yield significant benefits for sustainable tourism development (Strippoli et al., 2024; Rashwan et al., 2024). Women-led businesses often contribute to local economies by creating jobs and generating income that is reinvested into communities. Jiang et al. (2024) indicates that women are more likely to support local suppliers and preserve cultural heritage, which enhances community engagement and promotes cultural preservation. According to Ling et al. (2013) women-owned eco-tourism ventures in Montenegro have successfully integrated traditional practices with sustainable tourism, thereby fostering a deeper connection between visitors and local communities. Moreover, women entrepreneurs are often champions of environmental stewardship, implementing sustainable practices that minimize the ecological footprint of tourism activities (Costantini et al., 2021; Marinello et al., 2023; Li et al., 2024). This commitment is vital in a country like Montenegro, which is known for its stunning natural landscapes and biodiversity (Pécot et al., 2024). As travelers increasingly seek authentic experiences away from the hustle and bustle of city life, rural tourism provides a pathway for individuals to explore the serene beauty of nature, engage with local traditions, and participate in enriching activities (Martínez et al., 2019). This growing trend not only benefits travelers but also supports local communities, allowing them to showcase their heritage and sustain their way of life. According to Chin et al. (2025) rural tourism is not merely a form of escapism; it is an opportunity to appreciate and celebrate the unique characteristics that define rural living (Vujko et al., 2024b).

The importance of unique experiences in rural tourism cannot be overstated, as they serve as a primary motivator for travelers seeking to connect with a destination on a deeper level (Firstianto et al., 2024). Unique experiences are defined as activities or encounters that provide tourists with novel and memorable interactions, often characterized by their local flavor and distinctiveness (Qeidari et al., 2024). In Montenegro, tourists might seek out experiences such as participating in traditional grape harvesting, learning to prepare authentic Montenegrin dishes, or exploring hidden natural wonders like the pristine beaches of the Bay of Kotor (Nikčević, 2019).

According to a study conducted by Galli et al. (2018), travelers who engage in such unique experiences report significantly higher levels of satisfaction compared to those who partake in standard tourism offerings. The impact of these unique experiences extends beyond immediate satisfaction; they also foster a sense of connection to the destination, encouraging repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth recommendations. This emphasis on unique experiences aligns with the growing trend of experiential travel, whereby tourists increasingly prioritize immersive activities over passive sightseeing, thereby cementing the importance of this factor in the rural tourism landscape of Montenegro. Authenticity plays a crucial role in shaping the appeal of rural tourism, as it encapsulates the genuine aspects of a destination that resonate with visitors seeking meaningful connections (Hu & Wang, 2025). In the context of rural tourism, authenticity refers to the perceived truthfulness of experiences and interactions, often linked to local culture, traditions, and practices (Yanan, 2024). In Montenegro, authenticity manifests in various forms, such as the preservation of traditional handicrafts, folk music, and dance, which are integral to the local identity. Tourists are drawn to authentic experiences that allow them to engage with the local community, such as staying in family-run guesthouses or participating in cultural festivals. These authentic interactions not only enhance the visitor experience but also contribute to the preservation of local heritage (Zhao et al., 2024). According to Zhao et al. (2024) tourists who perceive their experiences as authentic are more likely to develop an emotional connection to the destination, leading to increased satisfaction and a desire to return. Thus, authenticity serves as a compelling magnet for rural tourism in Montenegro, creating a symbiotic relationship between tourists and the local culture that enriches both parties.

Sustainability is increasingly recognized as a foundational principle in the development of rural tourism (Gao & Wu, 2017) encompassing practices that minimize environmental impact while promoting social and economic benefits for local communities (Han et al., 2024). Defined as the ability to maintain ecological balance while meeting the needs of present and future generations, sustainability is particularly relevant in the context of Montenegro, where natural resources are a significant draw for tourists. Sustainable tourism practices in Montenegro include initiatives such as promoting organic farming, supporting eco-friendly accommodations, and implementing waste reduction programs (Morić, 2013). These practices not only protect the environment but also enhance the overall tourist experience by allowing visitors to engage with the nature of the region responsibly. The interconnections between unique experiences, authenticity, and sustainability create a holistic approach to rural tourism development (Cheng et al., 2025). According to Cheng et al. (2025) offering authentic experiences that showcase sustainable practices—such as guided eco-tours that educate tourists about local ecosystems—can enhance both the sense of authenticity and the sustainability of the tourism sector. By fostering these interrelationships, Montenegro can cultivate a rural tourism environment that resonates with the values of modern travelers, ultimately leading to a more sustainable and enriching experience for all.

The research started from the initial hypothesis H that an empowered woman represents a strong woman who gladly decides to engage in rural tourism, and therefore such a woman is a decisive factor in sustainable rural development. Women are the "backbone" of all rural tourism, entrepreneurship and rural development. The point is to reach women in rural areas and then have a positive effect on them, so studies like this aim to empower women and point out the main problems faced by women in villages. The main aim of the research was to use examples of good practice and experiences of women who are already involved in rural tourism, to be an indication to all women in the villages that rural tourism and their role within the activity is a sustainable form of business and that it is something that they should do to an even greater extent. In order to show that the future of rural tourism "lies" in women's hands because they are the bearers of rural tourism, it was necessary to conduct research on the motives and attitudes of tourists about rural tourism. This required the setting of a sub-hypothesis h1: the motives that indicate that rural tourism is a sustainable form of tourism represent a push-up effect for women and a way of empowering even more women to decide to engage in

rural tourism. Within their families or independently. Three fundamental factors that have been identified as pivotal for guest satisfaction in rural tourism are unique experiences, authenticity, and sustainability. These factors are not only interrelated but also mutually reinforcing, suggesting that enhancing one can lead to improvements in the others.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Women play an essential role in shaping rural tourism and entrepreneurship, acting as vital catalysts for sustainable development in their communities (Vujko et al., 2024a; Vujko et al., 2024b). By engaging in rural tourism, women can significantly contribute to local economic growth, allowing younger generations to remain in their villages and thus promoting the sustainability of these areas (Gulnur & Kamshat, 2025). This empowerment is not only economic but also social, as women often take the initiative to form associations that enhance their influence and foster better relationships within their communities (Allan, 2025). Through activities such as producing and selling local food, beverages, and souvenirs, women identify themselves as key players in the rural tourism industry, often referred to as “rural tourism product producers” or “providers” (Xu et al., 2025). Additionally, the fight for women's rights translates into improved living and working conditions, leading to a more equitable distribution of benefits within the tourism sector (Chin et al., 2025). However, traditional gender roles can impose challenges by limiting women's participation and creating conflicts between career aspirations and family responsibilities (Baird, 2024). Despite these hurdles, the evidence suggests that women's involvement in rural tourism not only enhances their own livelihoods but also catalyzes meaningful change, ultimately benefiting their families and communities at large (Krause, 2024). The multidimensional scale used in research highlights how women's empowerment encompasses psychological, social, and political dimensions, reinforcing the notion that empowering women is vital for the sustainable transformation of rural areas (Gu et al., 2024).

In recent years, Montenegro has emerged as a destination that intertwines natural beauty with rich cultural heritage, drawing attention to the potential of rural tourism (Despotović, 2018). However, within this burgeoning sector lies a critical aspect that warrants exploration: female entrepreneurship. The landscape of female entrepreneurship in rural tourism in Montenegro is characterized by a blend of historical influences and contemporary trends that shape women's involvement in the industry (Melović & Ćirović, 2023). Rural tourism, which encompasses various activities such as agritourism, eco-tourism, and cultural tourism, has gained traction due to Montenegro's landscapes and diverse cultural offerings. Traditionally, women have played a vital yet often overlooked role in the tourism sector, primarily as providers of hospitality and guardians of local traditions (Stanovčić et al., 2018).

With the advent of rural tourism, there has been a noticeable shift, as women are increasingly stepping into entrepreneurial roles, establishing guesthouses, artisanal shops, and eco-friendly tour operations. Current trends reveal a growing number of women-led initiatives, supported by government and non-governmental organizations that recognize the importance of gender equality in economic development. For instance, programs aimed at promoting female entrepreneurship, such as training workshops and funding opportunities, have begun to emerge, reflecting a positive shift towards inclusivity and empowerment in the tourism sector.

Women constitute a vital yet often overlooked segment of Montenegro's tourism workforce (Ljaljevic et al., 2023). While they represent a significant percentage of employees in hospitality and service roles, their presence diminishes in leadership and entrepreneurial positions. Barriers to women's full participation in tourism entrepreneurship include cultural norms that discourage women from pursuing business opportunities, limited access to financial resources, and insufficient representation in decision-making processes. According to Ljaljevic et al. (2023) to empower women in tourism entrepreneurship, several strategic initiatives can be implemented. First and foremost, tailored education and training programs are crucial. These programs should focus on business management, marketing, and digital skills, equipping women with the necessary tools to thrive in a competitive environment. For example, programs like the “Women in Business” initiative in Montenegro have shown promise in enhancing women's entrepreneurial skills. Additionally, facilitating access to financial resources, such as microloans and grants specifically designed for women entrepreneurs, can alleviate financial barriers. Institutions such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) have introduced initiatives aimed at improving women's access to financing. Furthermore, creating networking opportunities and mentorship programs can foster valuable connections that guide women entrepreneurs through the complexities of starting and managing a business. Such initiatives not only empower individual women but also cultivate a supportive community that encourages collaboration and innovation.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was conducted in two separate processes. First, women who are engaged in rural tourism as part of their family businesses were interviewed. The authors visited family businesses engaged in rural tourism on several occasions during the summer of 2024. These are organic farms, wineries, oil mills and katuns located in the towns of: Plužinje, Kolašin, Berane, Žabljak, Šavnik, Plav, Mojkovac and Nikšić in Montenegro. Katuns represent one of Montenegro's oldest traditions and are arguably its most significant cultural heritage. These temporary settlements, situated in the mountains, serve as summer retreats for cattle herders and provide grazing grounds for their livestock. Typically located in breathtakingly beautiful areas, the authentic Katun huts harmoniously blend into the surrounding landscape. Here, one will not encounter the conveniences of modern life; the roads are unpaved, and there is a lack of electricity, water supply, sewage systems, and internet access. Such rural environments cater to those seeking to revert to a century-old lifestyle, allowing them to step into a different era and experience the existence of nomadic herders who enjoy simple yet extraordinarily delicious meals. The research started from the initial hypothesis H that an empowered woman

represents a strong woman who gladly decides to engage in rural tourism, and therefore such a woman is a decisive factor in sustainable rural development. Also, a sub-hypothesis h1 was put forward: the motives that indicate that rural tourism is a sustainable form of tourism represent a push-up effect for women and a way of empowering even more women to decide to engage in rural tourism. Within their families or independently. In order to test the initial hypothesis H and sub-hypothesis h1, it was necessary to provide answers to two main questions:

- **Why do women engage in rural tourism?** and
- **Why do tourists decide to spend their free time in rural destinations and enjoy rural tourism?**

Women, who are engaged in rural tourism with their families, were asked a total of 12 questions to which they had to answer on a five-point Likert scale. They gave their opinion on rural tourism, that is, female entrepreneurship and women's empowerment (Vujko et al., 2019). We wanted to find an answer to the question: **Why do women engage in rural tourism?** Later, the results were interpreted based on their responses, grouped by similarity. Interpretivism and constructivism emerge as the predominant epistemological approaches that we have also used in our research. Interpretivism focuses on the subjective experiences of individuals, using qualitative methods to uncover deeper meanings and insights. Constructivism posits that knowledge is co-created through social interactions and is contextually bound, emphasizing the importance of understanding the specific circumstances that shape individuals' experiences. These epistemological stances shape not only the formulation of research questions but also the methodologies employed, thereby influencing the direction and results of research in significant ways.

The epistemological stance has influenced the understanding of women's entrepreneurship, particularly in the context of rural tourism. The interpretive stance has prioritized the subjective experiences and stories of women entrepreneurs, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the challenges they face, such as cultural barriers and access to resources. Through qualitative interviews and narrative analysis, the emotional and psychological dimensions of entrepreneurship were uncovered, thereby illuminating the motivations and aspirations that drive these women. Constructivism added another layer of depth by emphasizing the co-creation of knowledge; it encouraged the authors to engage with women entrepreneurs in a collaborative manner, recognizing that their insights are shaped by their unique socio-cultural context. This stance led to context-specific insights that challenge conventional narratives and highlight the heterogeneity of women's experiences in rural tourism.

The second part of the research referred to the guests of their rural enterprises. When registering and reserving their place in these facilities, guests left their email addresses to which, also during the summer of 2024, they were sent a group of 24 variables to which they were supposed to give answers on a five-point Likert scale. We wanted to find answers to the following questions: **Why do tourists decide to spend their free time in rural destinations and enjoy rural tourism?**

Out of the 300 e-mails sent, 228 were sent to the author's address and processed by factor analysis. Certain responses clustered around 3 specific factors:

- **Factor 1. Authenticity** - A1. People like to enjoy slow food and slow tourism that are opposite to the busy life; A2. Rural areas typically offer beautiful landscapes, fresh air, and natural surroundings that are often lacking in urban settings; A3. Local food and drinks offer a taste of the area's culinary heritage, while handicrafts showcase traditional skills and artistry and A4. Rural tourism authenticity enhances the overall travel experience.

- **Factor 2. Unique Experiences:** UE1. The chance to taste homemade dishes or buy handcrafted items creates memorable experiences that resonate with travelers long after their visit; UE2. The reduced noise levels and less crowded spaces allow individuals to relax and unwind, making it an attractive option for those seeking respite from daily stressors; UE3. Many villages have rich traditions and unique cultural practices that can be appealing to tourists and UE4. Learning about the stories behind the food and crafts fosters an appreciation for the culture and history of the area.

- **Factor 3. Sustainability:** S1. Many rural tourism initiatives focus on sustainable practices that preserve local resources and traditions; S2. Rural tourism often includes various outdoor recreational options such as farming experiences, fishing, cycling, or horseback riding and S3. Outdoor activities not only promote physical health but also enhance enjoyment through engagement with the environment.

Following the execution of factor analyses and the extraction of three characteristic factors, we proceeded to Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). This multivariate technique is specifically designed to assess hypothesized cause-and-effect relationships among the latent constructs within a conceptual model. In SEM, path coefficients serve as indicators of the strength of the relationships present in the dependent data. Additionally, this method effectively addresses issues related to multicollinearity, which occurs due to high correlations among predictor variables. A notable advantage of SEM over multiple regression and factor analysis is that all components of SEM modeling are guided by theoretical frameworks; thus, the construction and adjustments of models are predominantly informed by theoretical insights. A frequent misuse of SEM arises when data are merely fitted to an appropriate SEM, leading to the development of theory that is solely based on the outcomes of that analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Looking at Table 1, it can be concluded that 41 women participated in the first survey. They ranked the responses to the questions on a five-point Likert scale, and it is interesting that almost all questions were answered in intervals from 1 (Totally agree) to 3 (No opinion). And again, the mean values range from 1.20 to a maximum of 1.34, which means that the largest number of responses went in the direction of complete agreement with the statements.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics (Source: Authors, 2025)

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
v1	41	1	2	49	1.20	.401
v2	41	1	3	50	1.22	.475
v3	41	1	3	55	1.34	.617
v4	41	1	2	49	1.20	.401
v5	41	1	2	50	1.22	.419
v6	41	1	2	52	1.27	.449
v7	41	1	3	51	1.24	.538
v8	41	1	2	49	1.20	.401
v9	41	1	2	49	1.20	.401
v10	41	1	2	49	1.20	.401
v11	41	1	2	53	1.29	.461
v12	41	1	2	50	1.22	.419
Valid N	41					

Women engage in rural tourism in Montenegro for various reasons, primarily driven by economic motivations such as financial independence and empowerment. They also participate to preserve cultural heritage, build community networks, and create sustainable income opportunities. Additionally, rural tourism allows women to start small businesses, diversify their income sources, and take on leadership roles in decision-making processes within their communities.

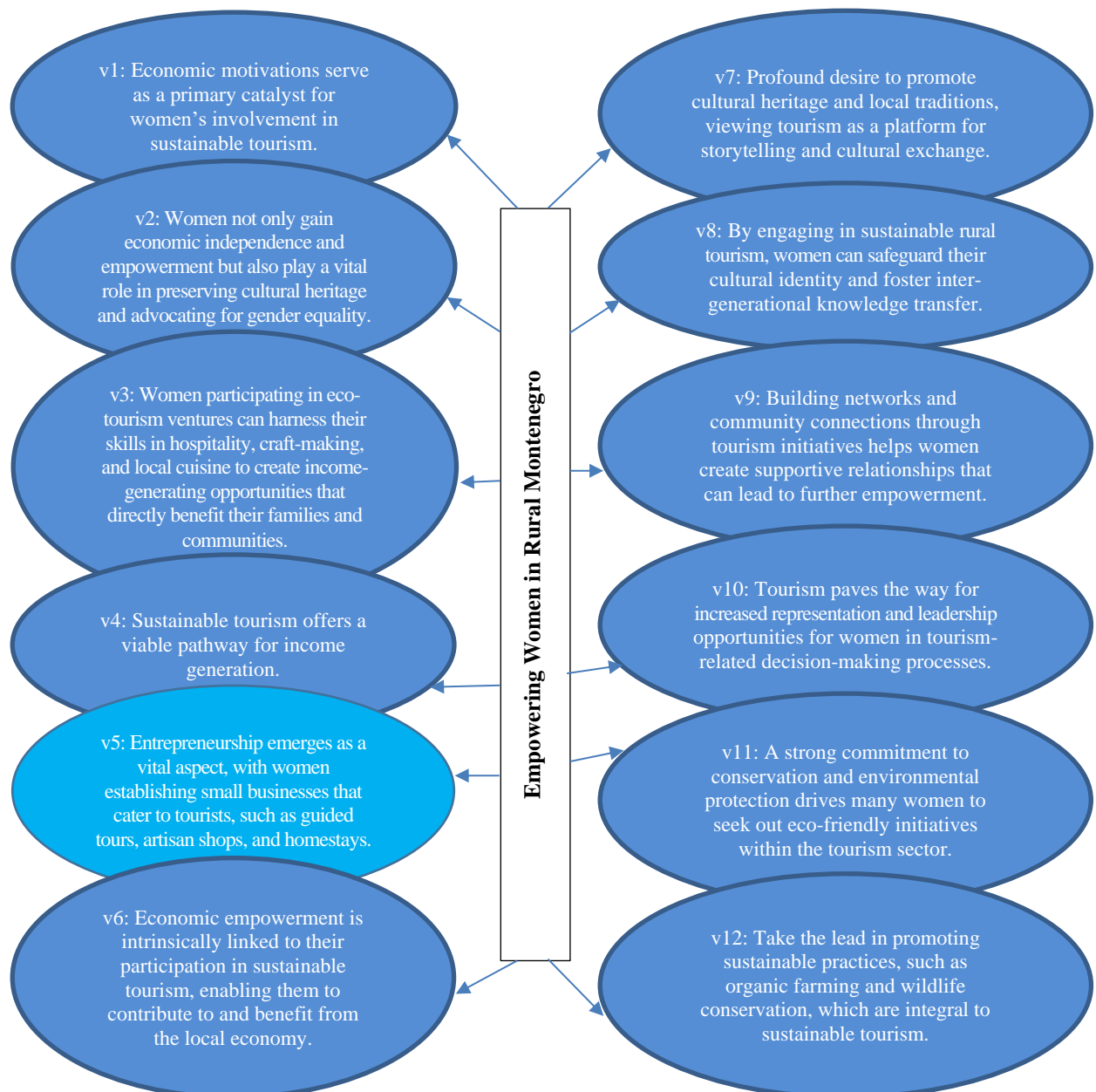


Figure 1. The reasons why women engage in rural tourism in Montenegro (Source: Authors, 2025)

Based on the information extracted from the Figure 1. the reasons why women engage in rural tourism in Montenegro include: **Economic Motivations and Financial Independence:** Women seek financial independence through tourism, which offers a viable source of income. This economic empowerment allows them to challenge and transform traditional gender roles, advocating for gender equality; **Cultural Preservation and Identity:** Engaging in tourism activities helps women preserve and celebrate their cultural heritage. By maintaining local traditions, crafts, and cultural practices, they ensure these elements survive for future generations. This engagement also fosters intercultural understanding and showcases their cultural identity. **Community and Networking:** Tourism creates opportunities for women to build networks and community support. By connecting with other entrepreneurs, they can share knowledge and collaborate, furthering their empowerment and fostering a sense of community and belonging;

**Sustainable Income and Economic Diversification:** Sustainable tourism offers a pathway for consistent income generation. Women participating in tourism-related activities, such as crafts, cuisine, and hospitality, create direct economic benefits for their families and communities. This involvement also helps diversify income sources, reducing dependency on traditional forms of income; **Entrepreneurial Opportunities:** The tourism sector provides women with opportunities to start small-scale businesses, such as guesthouses, craft shops, and local tours. These entrepreneurial ventures leverage their skills and knowledge, contributing to their economic empowerment and **Leadership Roles and Decision-Making:** Tourism paves the way for women to take on leadership roles in tourism-related decision-making processes. By participating in village tourism councils and other decision-making bodies, women can integrate their needs and aspirations into local tourism policies and practices. All this gave an answer to the first question Why do women engage in rural tourism? and it confirmed the initial hypothesis of work H that an empowered woman represents a strong woman who gladly decides to engage in rural tourism, and therefore such a woman is a decisive factor of sustainable rural development. The initial factor analysis (Table 2) produced a model that classifies the variables into three distinct factors, which together represent 78.88% of the variance. Examination of Table 2 reveals that two factors possess an Eigenvalue greater than 1, indicating that the extracted factors are both adequate and sufficient.

Table 2. Total Variance Explained (Source: Authors, 2025)

Factor	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3.955	35.956	35.956	3.398	30.888	30.888	2.812	25.567	25.567
2	3.343	30.387	66.343	3.046	27.691	58.579	2.627	23.880	49.447
3	1.379	12.537	78.880	1.392	12.653	71.232	2.396	21.785	71.232
4	.675	6.134	85.014						
5	.462	4.198	89.212						
6	.375	3.414	92.626						
7	.286	2.604	95.230						
8	.220	1.997	97.227						
9	.131	1.193	98.420						
10	.105	.952	99.372						
11	.069	.628	100.000						

Table 3. Factor Matrix (Source: Authors, 2025)

	Factors		
	Unique Experiences	Authenticity	Sustainability
A1	.683	.100	.343
A2	.898	.338	-.052
A3	.811	.356	-.287
A4	.623	.210	.512
UE1	-.403	.706	.278
S1	-.472	.470	.506
S2	-.006	.553	.521
S3	.150	.575	.443
UE2	-.015	.710	-.098
UE3	-.550	.663	-.247
UE4	-.607	.671	-.235

According to Table 3. Guests who enjoy rural tourism in Montenegro are primarily motivated by the desire for **Unique Experiences, Authenticity, and Sustainability**. These factors are interconnected, with strong relationships indicating that enhancing unique experiences can also promote authenticity and sustainability. By focusing on these key elements, tourism providers can improve guest satisfaction and attract more visitors to the region. The latent variables (F1, F2, F3) represent the main motives of guests: Unique Experiences, Authenticity, and Sustainability (Figure 2). Each latent variable is measured by multiple observed indicators (UE1-UE4, A1-A4, S1-S3). The path coefficients between latent variables and their indicators show the strength of the relationship. Higher values indicate stronger relationships. The relationships between the latent variables (F1, F2, F3) indicate how these motives are related to each other. For example, F1 (Unique Experiences) has a strong positive relationship with F3 (Sustainability) with a coefficient of 1.58. According to Figure 1. there is a significant positive relationship between Unique Experiences and Sustainability, suggesting that guests who value unique experiences also highly value sustainability. Authenticity is moderately related to both Unique Experiences and Sustainability.

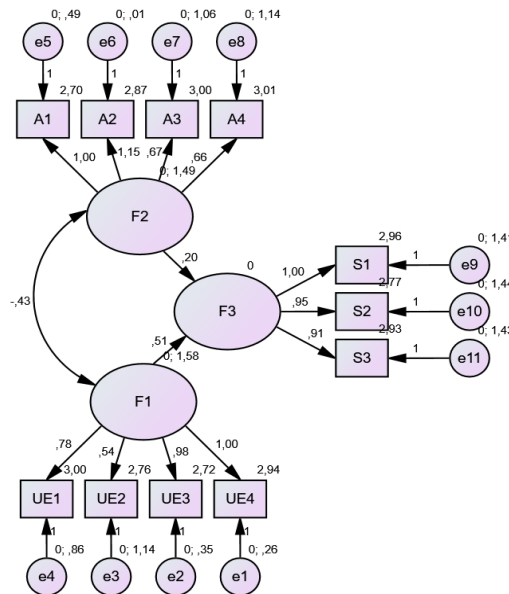


Table 4. Standardized Regression  
Weights: (Group number 1 –  
Default model) (Source: Authors, 2025)

			Estimate
F3	<---	F2	.384
F3	<---	F1	1.037
A1	<---	F1	.926
A2	<---	F1	.901
A3	<---	F1	.538
A4	<---	F1	.724
UE1	<---	F2	.866
S1	<---	F2	.997
S2	<---	F2	.622
S3	<---	F2	.602
UE2	<---	F3	.465
UE3	<---	F3	.441
UE4	<---	F3	.430

Figure 2. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) (Source: Prepared by the authors, 2025)

These assumptions provide a comprehensive understanding of the motives and attitudes of guests who stayed and enjoyed rural tourism in Montenegro based on the provided path diagram.

- Unique Experiences (F1) is strongly associated with its indicators, especially UE4 (0.26). **UE1 (0.86), UE2 (1.14), UE3 (0.35), UE4 (0.86)**: These coefficients indicate that UE4 is the most strongly associated with Unique Experiences, followed by UE2, UE1, and UE3. Error terms (e1 to e4) are relatively small, suggesting that F1 explains a significant portion of the variance in these indicators.

- Authenticity (F2) has a strong relationship with A3 (0.67) and A2 (1.15). **A1 (1.00), A2 (1.15), A3 (0.67), A4 (0.66)**: A3 has the strongest association with Authenticity, followed by A2, A4, and A1. Error terms (e5 to e8) indicate that F2 explains a substantial portion of the variance in A2, A3, and A4, but less so for A1.

- Sustainability (F3) is perfectly measured by S1 (1.00) and also strongly by S2 (0.95) and S3 (0.91). **S1 (1.00), S2 (0.95), S3 (0.91)**: S1 is perfectly associated with Sustainability, indicating it is a key indicator. Error terms (e9 to e11) are small, suggesting F3 explains most of the variance in these indicators. Looking at Table 4, it can be concluded that the positive impact of women entrepreneurs on local economies, community engagement, and environmental sustainability underscores the critical need for gender equality in tourism development. As Montenegro progresses towards a more inclusive tourism landscape, the empowerment of women will not only enrich the sector but also contribute to the overall well-being of society, paving the way for a more sustainable future. Therefore, the results obtained from the second research gave an answer to the second question: Why do tourists decide to spend their free time in rural destinations and enjoy rural tourism? and confirmed sub-hypothesis h1: that the motives that indicate that rural tourism is a sustainable form of tourism represent a push-up effect for women and a way of empowering even more women to decide to engage in rural tourism. Within their families or independently.

## CONCLUSION

The empowerment of women in rural tourism is crucial for both individual and community development, as it leads to economic growth through job creation and income generation while fostering social leadership among women. Despite the potential benefits, women face significant challenges such as limited access to funding, societal expectations, and a lack of tailored support networks, which hinder their participation in entrepreneurship. Addressing these barriers through education, financial resources, and community engagement is essential for promoting sustainable tourism practices and enhancing the overall tourism experience in rural areas like Montenegro. The research conducted in Montenegro explored the role of women in rural tourism, focusing on their motivations and the impact of their engagement on sustainable rural development. Interviews with 41 women involved in family-run rural tourism businesses revealed that economic independence, cultural preservation, and community networking were key reasons for their participation. Additionally, a survey of 228 tourists identified authenticity, unique experiences, and sustainability as primary motivators for choosing rural destinations, highlighting the interconnectedness of these factors and the potential for women's empowerment through tourism.

Rural tourism in Montenegro is profoundly shaped by the intertwined factors of unique experiences, authenticity, and sustainability. Each of these elements plays a crucial role in attracting and satisfying visitors, while also fostering a deeper connection between tourists and the local culture. Unique experiences offer travelers the opportunity to immerse themselves in the Montenegrin way of life, while authenticity enhances the emotional resonance of these encounters. Simultaneously, sustainable practices ensure that the natural and cultural resources that attract tourists are preserved for future generations. As Montenegro continues to develop its rural tourism sector, a focus on these interconnected factors will not only enhance visitor satisfaction but also contribute to the long-term viability and resilience of its tourism industry. By embracing the principles of unique experiences, authenticity, and sustainability, Montenegro can establish itself as a premier destination for travelers seeking meaningful and responsible tourism experiences.



Female entrepreneurship and rural tourism in Montenegro presents a compelling narrative of potential and resilience. As women increasingly engage in this sector, they are not only contributing to economic growth but also reshaping societal norms and promoting sustainable practices. However, to fully realize this potential, it is imperative that stakeholders address the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs, creating a more inclusive and supportive framework for their success. By empowering women in rural tourism, Montenegro can harness the transformative power of female leadership, paving the way for a brighter, more equitable future in the tourism industry. As Montenegro continues to develop its rural tourism sector, the role of women must be recognized and amplified, ensuring that their contributions are valued and their voices heard.

The biggest limitations of the study are found in the following items: 1. Small sample size: If the study included a limited number of participants, it may not accurately represent the wider population of women in rural Montenegro. This can lead to skewed results that do not reflect the experiences or needs of all women in similar contexts. 2. Potential bias in data collection: The methods used to collect data (eg surveys, interviews) can lead to bias if not carefully designed. For example, if only certain groups of women were interviewed (eg those already engaged in tourism), the perspectives of those who are not engaged or less empowered could be overlooked. 3. Lack of longitudinal analysis: If the study was cross-sectional and did not track changes over time, it may miss important trends or changes in women's empowerment and their impact on tourism development. Longitudinal studies provide insight into how relationships develop and can highlight long-term effects. 4. Limited generalizability to other regions: Findings specific to rural mountains Montenegro may not be applicable to other regions with different socio-economic conditions, cultural backgrounds or governance structures. This limits the ability to draw broader conclusions about women's empowerment and sustainable tourism elsewhere. 5. Insufficient consideration of cultural factors: The study may not fully take into account local cultural norms and values that affect the roles and opportunities of women in tourism development. Understanding these cultural dimensions is key to designing effective empowerment strategies that resonate with local communities. Acknowledging these limitations, future research can aim to address them and provide stronger insight into women's empowerment for sustainable rural tourism development.

**Practical Recommendations: Enhance Unique Experiences:** Focus on improving aspects related to UE4, as it has the strongest association with Unique Experiences.

- Develop unique and memorable activities that align with the guests' desire for unique experiences. One of the most effective ways to enhance unique experiences in rural tourism is through activities that showcase local culture. Traditional craft workshops, such as pottery and weaving, allow guests to gain hands-on experience while learning about the heritage and skills passed down through generations. Culinary experiences also play a crucial role in this cultural immersion. Farm-to-table dinners that feature locally sourced ingredients not only tantalize the taste buds but also educate guests about regional produce and sustainable practices. Imagine savoring a dish made with heirloom tomatoes and freshly harvested herbs while listening to the stories of the farmers who cultivated them. Furthermore, cultural festivals and local events, such as harvest celebrations or seasonal fairs, provide an authentic glimpse into the community's traditions, allowing visitors to engage with residents, partake in local customs, and create lasting memories. In addition to cultural experiences, immersive nature-based activities are essential for enhancing rural tourism. Guided nature walks and eco-tours offer guests a chance to explore the diverse flora and fauna of the region while learning about the local ecosystem. These activities can be enriched by knowledgeable guides who share insights on indigenous plant species, wildlife habits, and conservation efforts, fostering a deeper appreciation for the natural world. For the more adventurous traveler, activities such as hiking, kayaking, and birdwatching provide exhilarating ways to connect with the landscape. Additionally, stargazing events in rural areas, characterized by minimal light pollution, can offer guests a breathtaking view of the night sky, transforming a simple evening into an awe-inspiring experience. Participants can learn about constellations, planets, and even the myths surrounding them, deepening their connection to the universe and the rural environment. Finally, personalized guest interactions are pivotal in enhancing the overall experience in rural tourism. Tailored itineraries that reflect individual guest interests and preferences allow for a more meaningful exploration of the area. Moreover, opportunities for guests to interact with local families and communities, such as sharing a meal or participating in traditional activities, foster authentic connections and provide deeper insights into rural life. These interactions offer travelers a chance to learn firsthand about local customs, stories, and daily routines, turning their stay into a rich cultural exchange. Finally, implementing feedback mechanisms can greatly enhance the guest experience by allowing tourism operators to adapt their offerings based on visitor insights. By actively seeking guest opinions and suggestions, rural tourism providers can continually improve their services and ensure they meet evolving expectations, ultimately creating a cycle of enhancement that benefits both visitors and the local community.

**Promote Authenticity:** Highlight authentic experiences, particularly those related to A3 and A2, as they have strong associations with Authenticity.

- Ensure that marketing materials emphasize the authentic aspects of the rural tourism experience. To effectively market authentic rural tourism experiences, it is essential to employ strategic approaches that resonate with potential visitors. One powerful strategy is storytelling, which can convey genuine narratives that evoke emotional connections to the destination. By sharing the stories of local residents, their traditions, and their way of life, marketing materials can create a vivid picture of what visitors can expect. Engaging local communities in promotional efforts is crucial for authenticity; when locals participate in crafting marketing content, it ensures that the representation of their culture is both respectful and accurate. Additionally, leveraging social media platforms allows for the showcasing of real visitor experiences and testimonials, providing potential tourists with relatable and genuine insights. Sharing user-generated content that highlights authentic interactions, such as visitors enjoying a meal with a local family or participating in a traditional craft workshop, can significantly enhance the appeal of rural tourism experiences. By employing these strategies, marketers can create a compelling narrative that emphasizes the authenticity of rural tourism, drawing in curious travelers eager for genuine engagement.



**Emphasize Sustainability:** Given the strong relationship between Sustainability and both Unique Experiences and Authenticity, integrate sustainable practices into all aspects of the tourism experience.

- Promote sustainability initiatives and educate guests on the importance of sustainable tourism. The emphasis on sustainability in rural tourism is not only a response to the growing demand for responsible travel but also a critical strategy for the preservation of local cultures and ecosystems. By understanding the significance of sustainability, implementing effective strategies, and learning from successful case studies, rural communities can create a tourism model that benefits both visitors and residents alike. Integrated Marketing Strategy: Develop a marketing strategy that highlights the interconnectedness of Unique Experiences, Authenticity, and Sustainability.

- Use the strong inter-factor relationships to create a cohesive narrative that appeals to guests' values. The interconnectedness of unique experiences, authenticity, and sustainability forms a powerful framework for developing an effective marketing strategy in rural tourism. By emphasizing unique experiences that highlight local culture and traditions, tourism operators can create memorable engagements that resonate with travelers. Authenticity enhances these experiences by fostering genuine interactions between tourists and local communities, thereby enriching the overall travel experience. Finally, sustainability ensures that tourism practices contribute positively to the economic, social, and environmental fabric of rural areas. As rural tourism continues to evolve, embracing these interrelated elements will be crucial for creating a sustainable future that benefits both visitors and the communities they visit, ultimately transforming rural destinations into thriving hubs of cultural exchange and ecological stewardship.

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