

AGRITOURISM AS A PATHWAY TO WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: INSIGHTS FROM RURAL ALBANIA

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Abstract: Tourism literature has emphasized the potential of agritourism in empowering women in rural areas. Recently, there has been a rise in agritourism enterprises managed by women in rural regions of Albania. However, less attention has been paid to the role of agritourism in the empowerment of rural Albanian women and its impact on traditional gender roles. Assessing the role of women in entrepreneurship and societal gender perception, this article explores the potential link between agritourism development and women's empowerment in rural regions of Albania. Drawing on data collected from 2022 to 2023, through a focus group and semi-structured interviews, the findings highlight various positive outcomes. These include a reduction in poverty and unemployment among rural women, as well as enhanced social and economic empowerment. Furthermore, agritourism emerges as a catalyst for self-development and social empowerment for rural women across multiple dimensions. To capitalize on these benefits and promote gender equity in rural areas, future agritourism policies in Albania should incorporate more inclusive incentives.

Keywords: agritourism, entrepreneurship, women empowerment, gender, rural development, Albania

Highlights

- Agritourism plays an important role to promote women's entrepreneurial incentives.
 - Assessment of women's roles in entrepreneurship and societal gender perception.
 - Women's empowerment is a multifolded process.
 - Agritourism promotes gender equity in rural areas.
 - The need for gender-responsive policies, targeted training programs, and initiatives to increase women's access to resources and decision-making roles.
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1. Introduction

Rural communities serve as pivotal attractions for tourists seeking authentic experiences and cultural immersion (Jepson & Sharpley, 2018). Rural tourism encompasses a range of tourism experiences in rural settings, through utilizing rural attractions of rural areas and where agricultural production and other traditional practices play a central role (Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997). Rural tourism and agriculture are two sectors that complement each other very well and this interaction between tourism and agriculture has pushed agritourism to the forefront as an innovative agricultural activity (Fisher, 2019). As tourism continues to grow in local, regional, and global significance, there is a pressing need to prioritize the involvement of women in tourism as a potential driver for community development, especially in rural areas. Tourism has long been perceived as a fertile field for entrepreneurial initiatives (Li, 2008; Nikraftar & Hosseini, 2016) and it has been identified as providing opportunities specifically for women entrepreneurs (Haugen & Vik, 2008). Considering the fast growth of the tourism industry, agritourism presents an opportunity for preserving the rural environment and local cultures, increasing income (Hall, 2000) and playing an important role in invigorating local economies, while also providing women with opportunities for empowerment and advancement.

Annes & Wright (2015) study argued that invisibility has traditionally characterized the experience of women in agriculture. In fact, women have always been a determinant factor in the historic involvement in agriculture, starting from planting, nurturing plant, post-harvesting, and value-added processing for both market sales and family consumption (Halim et al., 2020). Furthermore, the historical invisibility of rural women has been reinforced through socio-cultural mechanisms, rooted in the patriarchal structure and agrarian ideology (Semali & Shakespeare, 2014).

In recent years, rural areas have experienced a notable surge in tourism activities, with agritourism emerging as a prominent manifestation of this trend (Tew and Barbieri, 2012). Many agritourism

enterprises in rural regions are run by women and agritourism is regarded as a means to enable women's autonomy by providing employment opportunities that lead them to decrease their economic reliance on men (LaPan et al., 2016). In fact, in rural communities where traditional gender roles persist, agritourism development serves as a catalyst for women's empowerment, boosting their self-esteem, fostering interdependence, and enhancing their entrepreneurial skills. At the same time, women play an essential role in the development, maintenance, and innovation of agritourism enterprises (Costa et al., 2017).

Given the entrepreneurial nature of agritourism, as highlighted by scholars such as Barbieri & Mahoney (2009) and Nickerson et al. (2001), it is crucial to examine its role in diversifying activities such as offering recreational, accommodation and food services. Understanding how agritourism contributes to goal accomplishment is essential for showcasing its benefits and ensuring the sustainability of such ventures. Agritourism not only fosters economic growth by creating employment opportunities and generating income but also has a profound impact on social development (Sulaj et al., 2022). By investing in basic infrastructure and curbing rural exodus, it significantly enhances the quality of life for local residents. Moreover, agritourism gives rise to new forms of family dynamics, reshaping the division of labor (Duffy et al., 2015). According to Hallinger et al. (2016), the proximity between domestic tasks and rural productive activities often leads to a redefinition of roles and a shift in gender division within women typically assumed roles. However, contemporary trends challenge this norm, with women increasingly occupying positions once exclusively held by men (Duarte & Pereira, 2018).

While there is a burgeoning interest in the agritourism sector as a catalyst for growth and development, only a limited number of studies have examined the factors influencing women's empowerment in agritourism enterprises and the rationale for measuring gender equality in entrepreneurship within this context. Annes and Wright (2015) have presented evidence of the potential positive connections between agritourism success and women's empowerment, highlighting that women's empowerment in agritourism encompasses economic, social, and cultural dimensions, while also identifying impediments and opportunities for advancing women in agritourism enterprises (McGehee et al., 2007).

The purpose of the paper is to explore the question of how agritourism development helps women empowerment in Albania's countryside to take new roles beyond those dictated by traditional lifestyles. The aim of this study is to analyse both existing literature on the topic and the results obtained through the field analysis at the agritourism enterprises, including interviews with relevant stakeholders from the sector. Firstly, the paper contributes to the exploration of theoretical frameworks that review the relationship between agritourism and women's empowerment. Furthermore, a better understanding of the intersection between agritourism development and gender will bring important insights to agritourism as a vehicle for women's empowerment. The qualitative methodology study is based on semi-structured interviews with women entrepreneurs in the agritourism sector. After discussing the findings and summarizing the main contributions, theoretical and practical implications for policymakers and tourism-led development practitioners are discussed.

2. Theoretical frameworks on agritourism and women's empowerment

As tourism is one of the biggest industries in the world and it always is seen as an important economic income and foreign currency exchange by governments, especially from developing and undeveloped countries, it is vital to explore how tourism can be an effective 'tool' in empowering women. Recognising the theoretical attention granted to tourism entrepreneurship, the paper examines the literature on gender and agritourism, aiming to emphasise the importance of attending to gender issues within tourism entrepreneurship. A number of studies have explored the relationship between agritourism and women's empowerment through various theoretical frameworks (Arroyo et al., 2019; Annes & Wright, 2015; Duarte & Pereira, 2018). They provide valuable insights into how agritourism can be leveraged to expand women's capabilities and potential, highlighting the importance of addressing gender inequalities, promoting women's empowerment and leadership, and recognizing the diverse needs and preferences through participation in agritourism activities (Bridges et al., 2023).

Gender and Development frameworks

Gender and Development (GaD) frameworks focus on understanding and addressing gender inequalities within development processes (Beneria et al, 2015). The approach focuses on the gendered division of labor and gender as a relation of power embedded in institutions (Reeves & Baden, 2000). In the context of agritourism and women's empowerment, GaD frameworks examine how gender roles, norms, and power dynamics shape women's participation in and benefits from agritourism enterprises (Savage et al., 2023).

The involvement of women in tourism is a potential driver for community development, especially in rural areas (Duarte & Pereira, 2018). Emphasizing the significance of human resources in tourism, the UNWTO (2019) underscores the pivotal role of women in advancing the tourism sector and their invaluable contributions to its management. Tourism activities offer women valuable employment opportunities that might otherwise remain inaccessible to them (Çiçek et al., 2017), thus the employment in tourism allows women to improve their social status within the community (Knight & Cottrell, 2016) and can facilitate gender equity. Tourism emerges as a pathway toward empowering women to assume leadership roles. In their study, Beneria et al. (2015) highlight the importance of recognizing women rather than passive beneficiaries as active contributors and decision-makers within the sector. GaD approach emphasizes the need to challenge traditional gender roles and promote women's access to resources, decision-making processes, and leadership roles within agritourism enterprises.

Apart from economic benefits, agritourism can empower women by fostering self-perception, independence, and identity, while also encouraging their pursuit of education (Arroyo et al., 2019). Furthermore, Cánoves et al. (2004) consider women as the main protagonist in rural areas because they appear as managers and take on leadership role, bringing added value to typical regional products and creating new jobs in rural areas. According to Bridges et al. (2023), these workforce opportunities for women allow them to have a stronger presence in private and public spaces in traditionally male-dominated communities. By fostering an environment that supports women's active participation and leadership in agritourism, GaD frameworks contribute to the realization of more inclusive and sustainable development outcomes for rural communities, ultimately driving broader societal progress towards gender equality.

Feminist economic theories

Feminist economic theories offer valuable insights into the intersection of agritourism and the empowerment of women. Martinez Caparros (2018) argues that whilst tourism is often depicted as an economic sector that holds potential to empower women due to its diverse, dynamic and flexible nature, it remains a highly gendered activity that reinforces traditional roles by offering temporary and part-time employment in traditionally gendered skills.

Women's empowerment is the process of enabling women to fully participate in decision-making that shapes their lives, through leadership training, coaching, and access to resources (Thien et al, 2009). Tourism economics needs to be re-configured from the perspective of the diversity of women's experiences. When empowered, women can drive economic and social development within their communities and beyond.

These theories critique traditional economic models that often overlook or undervalue women's contributions to the economy, including their roles in agritourism (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2019). They highlight the importance of recognizing and valuing women's unpaid labor in agritourism activities, such as caregiving, food preparation, and hospitality, which are often essential for the success of agritourism enterprises but frequently go unrecognized and unrewarded (McGehee et al., 2007). Furthermore, feminist economic theories advocate for policies and practices that promote gender equity and empower women in agritourism. This includes ensuring equal access to resources, such as land, finance, and training opportunities, as well as promoting women's participation in decision-making processes within agritourism enterprises and broader policymaking forums (Jamal & Dredge, 2014). By challenging gender

norms and promoting women's economic autonomy, feminist alternative economics contribute to the empowerment of women in agritourism and beyond (Kalisch & Cole, 2022).

These theories emphasize the need for intersectional approaches that take into account the diverse identities and experiences of women involved in agritourism and tailor interventions accordingly to address the specific barriers they face. Overall, feminist economic theories provide a critical framework for understanding and addressing gender inequalities in agritourism, offering pathways for promoting women's empowerment and fostering more inclusive and equitable forms of development in rural areas (Pécot et al., 2024).

Women's capabilities through participation in agritourism activities

The capability approach provides a framework for understanding human well-being and development beyond traditional measures like income or economic status. Nussbaum (2011) argues that women's capabilities are often constrained by social, economic, and cultural factors, and agritourism can provide opportunities for women to enhance their capabilities by participating in decision-making, gaining skills, and accessing resources.

According to Grasmuck & Espinal (2000), women's capabilities through participation in agritourism is “not a simple matter of material or economic power” but norms and customs are formed by deep beliefs that dictate behavior and privileges of individuals in societies and impact all aspects of life. The capability approach emphasizes the importance of expanding individuals' capabilities, which are the substantive freedoms people have to lead the kind of lives they value. This approach suggests that women's participation should not only be measured in terms of economic outcomes but also in terms of their ability to pursue valuable activities and roles within agritourism ventures (Halim, 2020).

Kabeer's work on gender, poverty, and empowerment emphasizes the role of women in shaping their own lives and strategies for development. Women's empowerment is about the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such the ability to exercise choice that includes three aspects: material resources, decision-making, and well-being outcomes. These three dimensions of choice are indivisible in determining the meaning of an indicator and its validity as a measure of empowerment (Kabeer, 1999).

According to Rao (2011), women empowerment is a process in which women individually and collectively become active, knowledgeable, and goal oriented, and lead or support initiatives to overcome gender inequalities. Membership in a group gives women visibility and provides them with a legitimate forum to articulate their needs. It permits a gradual building of their capacity through sharing that enhances their potential as agents of change and tourism network development (Nussbaum, 2011).

Exploring intersection of agritourism and women's empowerment in Albania

Agritourism is commonly categorized as a subset of rural tourism (Phillip et al., 2010) and a tool for rural development. It offers visitors the opportunity to enjoy leisure activities while staying on a working farm, where specific attractions and activities are tailored to attract tourists (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008). Central to the agritourism experience are farming-related aspects, which serve as primary attractions for visitors where tourism products are linked to agricultural environment and farm products. (Sharpley & Sharpley 1997). Undoubtedly, agritourism stands as a cornerstone for driving rural development, playing an increasingly vital role in shaping the dynamics of the agricultural sector, increasing revenues and employment, preventing rural depopulation and the abandonment of traditional cultural heritage (Lupi et al., 2017). Agritourism can support the successful regional development, based on a well-functioning relationship between the agricultural and the tourism sector. On the one hand, agritourism benefits from the attractive landscape and its sightseeing, and on the other hand the agriculture sector through active farms guarantees the cultivation of the landscape (Ciolac et al., 2020).

In Albania, agritourism is a path that links both sectors in a unique way and their future will depend on their ability to develop a well-balanced partnership. The advantages of agritourism development in

the country lie in its ability to diversify rural economies, create employment opportunities, preserve agricultural heritage, and promote sustainable development through tourism (Domi & Belleti, 2022). These benefits may include enhanced valorization of the farm's agricultural products, as well as social inclusion initiatives such as changes in gender roles and increased female employment participation (Sulaj et al., 2022).

Agritourism has been the most rapidly growing form of rural tourism in Albania for the last 15 years since the country is well placed for agritourism development. The country offers a promising landscape for agritourism development due to Albania's beautiful natural assets and agricultural resources, its traditional gastronomy and rich cultural heritage (Nagy et al., 2017). It provides employment for about half the population in rural areas and accounts for around 20% of the country's GDP while offering new investment for local communities. Agritourism in the country is showing more and more that it is one of the sectors with the greatest potential to develop the country's economy and to promote women's entrepreneurial incentives and self-employment, in traditionally male-dominated branches.

At present, there are more than 200 active farms that are involved in the agritourism sector, of which 27 are registered agritourism farms in Albania certified by the Ministry of Tourism and Environment, and 36 of them are precertified agritourism farms. Many other farms possess a potential for conversion into the agritourism sector. They can accommodate over 400–600 agritourists a week and approximately 30% of these certified agritourism farms are managed by women (MoTE, 2024).

Agritourism farms commonly originate as a family enterprise, frequently managed by younger entrepreneurs. Agritourism entrepreneurs have re-directed their agricultural family businesses into typical agritourist activities. Recently, agritourism has garnered the attention of policymakers due to its recognized role as a catalyst for rural development, particularly in agricultural regions that have undergone declines.

In Albania, women constitute approximately 50% of the population and wield significant influence within the country's economic production chain. Official statistics indicate that within the age group of 15–64, women are predominantly employed in agriculture (INSTAT, 2023). Rooted in local traditions and culture, agritourism enterprises are largely sustained by the skills, capabilities, and efforts of women. Changes in the social, economic, and political system in Albania at the beginning of the new millennium marked the start of another new phase in the development of women's entrepreneurship (Kambo et al., 2022). Not only has the number of women-owned enterprises notably increased since the 1990s, but the structure has also changed, such that apart from traditional "female" economic activities, women's enterprises have increasingly appeared in the service sector and especially tourism.

In the context of agritourism and short supply chains, women's empowerment assumes a pivotal strategic significance. Considering the familial dynamics prevalent in agricultural settings and the predominant traditional agricultural practices across Albanian territories, women emerge as invaluable repositories of knowledge regarding product processing and the traditional utilization of local products of origin. They represent custodians of traditional knowledge, integral to the preservation and enhancement of cultural heritage within these domains (Sulaj et al., 2023).

In rural areas of Albania, women are increasingly enhancing their production skills through the burgeoning sector of agritourism. Despite constituting half of the labor force in agriculture and exerting significant influence, their role remains inadequately supported and promoted, particularly in agritourism guesthouses where they often take the lead. While women often manage agritourism farms, they receive comparatively less support than men in accessing grants. Challenges such as gender biases, property disputes in rural areas, and infrastructure deficiencies further impede their progress. Research conducted by FAO reveals that providing women with access to resources equivalent to their male counterparts could enhance the productivity of women in agricultural enterprises in developing countries by 20–30% (FAO 2016). Over the past ten years, governmental policies are addressing these issues by prioritizing rural tourism, expanding opportunities for women's participation in financing initiatives, and focusing on integrated development initiatives in rural women's empowerment. Agritourism can be an instrument to promote equal rights and opportunities for women, creating dynamic, unique enterprises, oriented

towards the supply chain, which have a high value for the social development of communities and villages (Johanson, 2021).

Through entrepreneurship, women can achieve financial independence and contribute to household incomes, while also gaining social connections and leadership opportunities. These have the potential to affect family dynamics and social structure (Duffy et al., 2015). Additionally, by showcasing their cultural heritage and participating in decision-making processes, women can promote community development and gender equality within the agritourism sector. While these positive impacts suggest women can benefit from agritourism, little is known about the dimensions of changes induced by women's empowerment and their roles within rural communities.

3. Methodology

This study sheds light on the various factors that influence the empowerment of women entrepreneurs through agritourism farms in Albania. For the realization of this qualitative study, some critical variables in the dynamics of agritourism and women's empowerment were taken into account. A qualitative research method is used to collect data on narratives and personal experiences of focus groups, allowing the participants to express themselves more freely and to elaborate on their answers as well as to interact with the interviewer and thus ask questions. They were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling and purposive sampling was used to ensure variation in participants' agritouristic entrepreneurship background.

The initial phase consisted of finding different agritourism farms led by female agri-entrepreneurs. Based on this information, contacts were established with women (co-)owners of agro-tourism farms. As study material, there was a number of 9 agritourism farms run by women who represented the focus group of the study. The agritourism farms managed by women had a geographical distribution where 2 of them were located in the northern part of Albania, while 4 of them were located in the central part and 3 in the southern part of the country.

The selected focus group was represented by women between the ages of 25 to 60. Another characteristic of the choice was the nature of the family's cooperation and involvement in the activity they lead, as well as their communication skills with the community and visitors. In addition to this, the attitudes, feelings, and experiences and reactions related to the agritourism activity, the self-development and the community's impact were taken into account in the focus group.

The study explores the empowerment of women in the agritourism sector in Albania, and in terms of gender, it singles out the community of women who run some agritourism farms. The successful models of this activity have been selected among a considerable number of agritourism activities, where there are also men who already have successful stories. In addition to these considerations, cases of failures and bankruptcies from wrong management and entrepreneurship without having a strategy and vision for the model of a successful agritourism farm were also taken into account.

Some of the characteristics of the selection of the women who formed the focus group were such as: success in managing the farm, the ability to be a leader, communication with stakeholders and visitors, common mission, promotion of agritourism activities, diversification of farms, preservation of nature, ownership of property, cooperation with farmers and producers of organic farms, active participation in tourism development policies and especially agritourism (Duffy et al., 2015; Gil et al., 2019). Farms run by women represented diversified activities in tourism with particularities and common characteristics as described above.

A criterion for the selection of focus group of women entrepreneurs who managed agritourism farms was also related to the typology of agritourism activities (Phillip, et al. 2010; Lupi, et al., 2017). It has been taken into consideration that their farms have the typology with all the elements that can be found in a farm, such as accommodation, services, location, cultivation of plants and fruits, breeding of animals, cultural and creative activities, recreation centers, presence of basins and water sources, natural diversity,

proximity to forests, national parks and places of archaeological and cultural attraction, as well as connections and cooperation with the rural community of the area (Hall, 2000; Johansson, 2021).

Based on the suggestions of Oliveira (2011), this research was carried out in direct contact with the natural environment by collecting data and information about agritourism farms managed by women. A secondary source of information was the data obtained from the Albanian Ministry of Tourism and Environment (MTE, 2024) as the authority to certify agritourism farms.

The data for the variables in the study were collected during the years 2022–2023 on the basis of a semi-structured questionnaire. In this context, during the study, several questions were used with the one-answer technique to include basic information, suggesting that in many cases, it is better than multiple answers (Huselid & Becker, 2000). A semi-structured questionnaire was used for data collection, offering flexibility in question formulation and the opportunity to focus on specific topics. This approach enabled a deeper exploration of the role of agritourism in the dimensions of women's empowerment. The questionnaire was based on the face-to-face interview method and consisted of closed and open questions. Answers to many different questions with a double structure (yes/no answer) were used more often. Filter questions were used in the questionnaire to highlight the variety of dimensions of empowerment and the multiple patterns of opportunities and challenges within the agritourism sector.

The interview was conducted with open questions in the form of extended interviews. The interview included questions addressed to each agritourism entrepreneur to study their profile, activities and commitment, as well as their narratives of being an agritourism farm entrepreneur. The standard of the study based on the evaluation of the variables that play an important role on agritourism and the dimensions of women's empowerment.

The objective of the study was to know the state of agritourism entrepreneurship in rural areas, to better understand the current conditions of Albania's involvement of women in entrepreneurship in rural regions and the potential link between agritourism development and women's empowerment in rural regions. Furthermore, it aims to evaluate the influence and the social gender perception in their work environments, recognizing the challenges and the opportunities faced by rural residents in Albania and knowing their contribution to rural communities to find out sustaining critical factors of the success of agritourism farms led by women.

The research questions for achieving this objective are focused on the following issues: How the development of agritourism has affected the empowerment of women in the rural areas of Albania? What are the main factors contributing to the success and promotion of agritourism enterprises managed by women? Is women-led agritourism supported by policy, strategy and financial support?

In response to the above questions from the interviews conducted on the focus group of agritourism farms have been foreseen to collect data, facts, knowledge and described events related to the participation and empowerment of women in the agritourism sector. Other kind of information identified as areas for policy advocacy, financing and networking have been considered as tools to support and promote gender equality and women's empowerment in agritourism. In order to answer the research questions, a semi-structured questionnaire was drawn up, where for each research question, several questions are planned to be asked from the questionnaire in order to gather information and analyze it further.

The questionnaire used for the entire interview was designed to be focused on some key questions as follows: 1. What is the age, educational background of the women who run the agritourism farms? 2. How are the agritourism farms distributed and where are they located, those managed by women? 3. How long is the experience in agriculture, hospitality and tourism (less/more than 5, 10 and 15 years)? 4. What is the current role of women in agritourism and what is the reason of them for involvement and engagement in farm, kitchen and handicraft work? 5. How is the socio-economic impact of women in their communities, in employment opportunities and the entire community? 6. What is the women's access to resources such as land, capital and skills in tourism activities? 7. Does all women have access to assets? 8. What are the cultural norms, prejudices and economic reasons that exist in this sector? 9. Are reported programs, financial assistance, governmental and non-governmental assistance supporting female

empowerment in agritourism farms? 10. How do you evaluate the decision-making power of women in agritourism and what are the plans and aspirations for the future? The questionnaire closes by asking for the interviewers' suggestions and comments.

4. Findings and discussion

The study was conducted on the basis of interviews conducted in a focus group selected from the community of women who managed agritourism farms in the rural areas of Albania and who knew well the offer of this sector. It is crucial to understand the dynamics of women's empowerment in the agritourism sector in Albania considering the various factors that influence the participation, opportunities and challenges in agritourism farms.

The impact of agritourism on the empowerment of women in Albania

Despite a short history of development, agrotourism has made a number of achievements in Albania. Farmers have significantly increased their income generation by developing agritourism farms. From questionnaire respondents assessing the socio-economic impact of women's involvement in agritourism on their families and communities, we aim to explore the effects of agritourism on income generation, employment opportunities and community development of women's involvement in agritourism provides opportunities for economic empowerment by generating income and increasing financial independence (Sulaj et al., 2022).

After conducting the interviews, the data was analyzed, which, according to the questions, were detailed and discussed with other literature sources.

Tab 1. Women agritourism entrepreneurs profile. Source: own research, 2024

Name	Location	Experience (years)	Age (years)	Education
Tome	Lezhë	17	50	Secondary
Almira	Tiranë	12	43	Terciary
Bela	Berat	7	41	Terciary
Lume	Durrës	13	45	Secondary
Jehona	Kukës	6	37	Terciary
Vesa	Korçë	14	39	Terciary (Master)
Diella	Tiranë	11	44	Secondary
Evelina	Gjirokastër	8	42	Secondary
Alma	Përmet	6	39	Terciary

From the analysis of the data for the first question about the demographic data, it shows that the average age of the women entrepreneurs who managed the agritourism ventures is 42 years old. The predominance of young agri-entrepreneurs constitutes a great potential for the development of agritourism activities. In addition, Lupi et al. (2017) argued that agritourism farms managed by young farmers have a higher number of employees and a higher chance of doing agritourism. In response to the second question, the statements of the interviewed women showed that the largest distribution of agritourism farms is in the central part of Albania, but the agritourism farms in the southern and northern parts are mainly run by women.

Answers to additional questions about women agritourism entrepreneurs have mainly educational backgrounds in economics, agriculture, tourism and food technology. About 20% of them have 15 years of experience in agriculture and know the technologies well of agricultural production. The data show that 12% of women who manage agritourism farms have 10 years of experience in agritourism, while 10% of them have 5 years of experience.

In a similar study, it is emphasized that there are also non-economic benefits, for example, educating the public on the role and value of agriculture, restoring the connection between urban and rural areas,

and preserving family heritage such as historic buildings and traditions. In this context, the education of women in the agritourism sector has a significant impact as a motivating and inclusive factor in these activities, establishing links between the rural and urban communities (Arroyo et al., 2019).

There were no agritourism farms in Albania 33 years ago due to the centralized model of the economy. The greatest development of agritourism is observed in the last 12 years, which has significantly influenced the diversification of the tourism economy, promoting the entrepreneurship of women in this sector with many models of success. For many women in Albania, agritourism has been and remains a new and attractive opportunity. This fact is also evidenced by a considerable number of women agritourism entrepreneurs. Examples of success include the case of several agritourism destinations run by women: Dielleza in Lezhë, Blerina in the rural areas of Tirana and Alma in Përmet (Albanian Ministry of Tourism and Environment, 2024).

"I've been practicing this activity for nearly a decade. We started the outdoor activities by accompanying a single tourist, and today we accompany thousands. Throughout our journey, one principle has been the same: prioritizing our guests' satisfaction. We've consistently strived to curate unforgettable experiences, outdoor adventures, authentic cuisine, and moments of tranquility".

The information obtained about women farm managers in agritourism provided new insights into the status and role of Albanian women entrepreneurs. It is shown that in the last 5 years there have been girls and young women who have started to create and manage agritourism enterprises because the policies of the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development have supported support schemes for the establishment of agritourism guesthouses and farms. In addition, projects led by women receive additional evaluation points compared to their male counterparts, and women under 40 are eligible for increased grant opportunities (ARDA, 2023).

In the 20 years after the collapse of the communist system, the development of agriculture and tourism did not promise that women would undertake such initiatives due to many factors such as the lack of legal status of private property, land fragmentation, mass emigration, low standards of living, lack of investments, lack of gender equality, lack of education in tourism and hospitality, high level of poverty, high level of unemployment, etc. The development of agritourism has been slow after the 1990s and after the 2000s, the first farms with a classic typology of agritourism began to be built (Hall, 200; Braholli et al., 2022). During this period, women in rural areas were engaged in agricultural work, housework, child care, and men were engaged in managerial activities, trade and representation at the farm level.

Experiences for the representation and management of women in agritourism started mainly after 2012 and it has been a burgeoning interest in this sector. Especially, in the last decade, agritourism in Albania has been diversified and women have taken an important role in this sector, being the most successful model in agritourism enterprises (One Planet, 2004).

The lack of initiative before has been one of the factors that has inhibited the representation of women in this sector. Albania also inherited patriarchy and gender inequality from the communist past. The demagogy that women were equal to men was a falsity, the reality was different. It took time after the collapse of the communist system, for women to be involved in enterprises such as agritourism. "Self-discoveries" become a problem when the investor is quickly copied by later investors, who cut the first mover's profitability down to a point where the investment no longer pays off. Agritourism in Albania faces such a problem, where the problem is not many actors but their small number. What has happened in recent years has changed this situation, because women, with their entry and the establishment of new agritourism businesses, have diversified this sector, making it more attractive for potential tourists (<https://growthlab.hks.harvard.edu> › growthlab).

The impact of agritourism in the empowerment of women in Albania is related to a series of factors and conditions that this sector creates to promote entrepreneurship initiatives by women and to create models of efficient management of these activities. The history of the development of agritourism in Albania has had its own colors and this has been accompanied by models of success and failure. What is noticeable is the fact that so far there is no case where women entrepreneurs in agritourism have failed. So in terms of gender, women remain the model of success in management and work in their agritourism

farms. But it should be noted that there are many cases when agritourism farms run by men have not been able to have long activity due to mismanagement and difficulties created in the work and activities of the farms.

The involvement of the community seems to be emphasized here and women in rural tourism makes it successful, giving a positive impact on the Albanian agritourism sector. The success of rural tourism cannot be conceived without the involvement of women. This affects the increase in the quality of services in tourism, in ethics, increasing partnerships, establishing new models of farms integrating cultural heritage for visitors (Nagy et al., 2017).

Factors influenced women empowerment in agritourism farms

Regarding the information on the current involvement and representation of women within agritourism sector, the data collected from the interviews specifying the role, responsibility, reason for involvement and engagement in farm, kitchen and handicraft work, show that women who run agritourism enterprises represent one third of the people who run agritourism businesses. Almost all the women interviewed declared that they have good management skills and that they are involved in agritourism out of passion, desire and ability to undertake and challenge themselves to establish an agritourism farm or guesthouse with the aim of providing income, support for the family, and having an impact in the community. According to the interviewees, this has been a difficult decision, since in addition to family commitment, the management of agritourism enterprises requires determination, energy, care and coping with many difficulties related to agricultural activities.

One of the personal stories told by a successful woman in agritourism demonstrates the determination and courage in the first years of transition to create the farm and all the needed infrastructure for a sustainable business.

My history with tourism started in 1999. At the time, discussions surrounding tourism in Albania were absent and everywhere in the media there was only talk about migration. It was not about foreign tourists, but only local ones. I started from scratch, armed only with a profound love for life, breathtaking landscapes and a deep reverence for our cultural heritage.

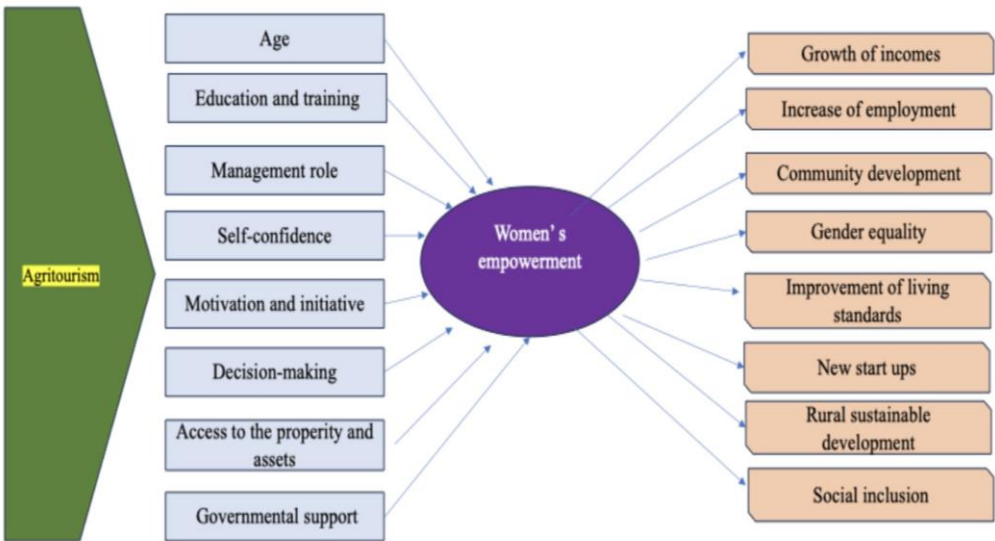


Fig 1. Mind map of female empowerment in agritourism. Source: own research, 2024

The data collected for the question that aimed to assess the economic impact of women in the communities that run agritourism enterprises and the impact of agritourism on income generation, employment opportunities and community development shows that indeed all women who led agritourism farms are quite active. Many girls and women have followed their model to stimulate the start-ups of new agritourism businesses. The gender relevance indicator concerning the leadership of

enterprises emphasises the raising percentage of women covering a relevant entrepreneur role (Caparros, 2018).

From the data gathered, we concluded that the most common motive for women starting their own business was “to do something” for themselves. In addition to financial motives, very important was the quest for self-development and self-realization to prove their capabilities and achieve a higher degree of freedom and independence. This also agrees with previous research findings (Dur & Glazer, 2008). Regarding the improvement of living standards and the increase in income, it has been possible to declare that all the women who run such businesses have expressed that they have had an increase in income generation, which compared to 3 years ago, has increased significantly.

Around 1/3 of the enterprises are led by women and there has been a notable growth of agritourism start-ups by women in recent years, which has also been a result of the better measures adopted by the policymakers (Zoto et al., 2013). Since Albanian rural areas are well-known and highly regarded for their artisan and handcrafted products and their culinary tradition, there is more unexploited potential to tap into. Although the percentage of tourism enterprises run by women is slightly above the national average, which is a positive start, given the characteristics in terms of unemployment and their strength in terms of agritourism-related activities (Hall, 2000; One Planet, 2024).

The study has assessed the economic impact into a broader societal level to understand women's integration into agritourism value chains. Highlight challenges related to market access, market linkage, value addition, and the role of certification and quality standards in enhancing women's competitiveness have been evident in the study group of agroturism farms.

The data collected from the answers to the sixth question demonstrated that most of the women who run agritourism own resources such as land and capital, and are engaged in tourist activity and promotion of joint events and activities. In addition to land as capital, women who run agritourism farms have expanded real estate as investments, livestock and processing units increasing access to various assets aimed at increasing income and business expansion.

As young women from south Albania said: "For me, access to land, financial resources, information, and technology are very important in women's empowerment in agritourism. More access to these resources and you will see the impact on women's participation, productivity, and decision-making in the future".

Data collected from the questionnaire regarding the social challenges of agritourism, the identification of barriers, limitations of access and societal factors that affect this sector, clearly show that the entrepreneurship of this activity has encountered many barriers and difficulties, which in fact have raised their determination to be in this job market and to broaden their businesses.

Starting a business in tourism is not easy and the respondents in the study faced many obstacles. From the focus group discussion, at first, it was the lack of initial funds to start a business. The second issue was the unfavorable attitude of the social environment towards women who enter into business, including tourism. This barrier is more present among women from rural and peri-urban areas, however from interviewees and previous studies (Duarte & Pereira, 2018), it is suggested that there is a narrowing ratio of males to females in the tourism ventures.

Referring to the eighth question, traditions and culture have played an important role of women's initiatives in agritourism enterprises because together with nature they have influenced the inclusion and empowerment of women in these types of enterprises. Women are interested in exploring and promoting rural traditions and culture have increased the numbers of visitors and incomes (Caparros, 2018).

The ability of women to lead and decision-making power was evident in an increasing role of women in the process of leading and management activities within agritourism enterprises. All interviewed women have managing roles in agroturism farms and this is a clear indication of women's empowerment. Kabeer (1999) defines empowerment as the expansion of assets and capabilities of people to make strategic life choices, participate in, negotiate with, influence and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives.

Women's empowerment is a multidimensional process that draws from and affects many aspects of life, including social standing, emotional health, as well as economic power (Halim et al., 2020).

Analyzing all agritourism farms, it was noticed that women have strengthened their role in the management and decision-making of agritourism enterprises, showing good managerial and professional skills. In addition to promoting economic benefits such as employment and income, agritourism promotes social benefits for women, ranging from the recognition of their dedication, the achievement of experience and knowledge, and increased self-esteem and leadership role (McGehee, 2007; LaPan et al., 2016).

One of the successful women in agritourism said: *"Agritourism unites every dimension of life, it shakes us to turn our heads from the past, it increases awareness about nature, about the nectar that mother earth offers, about authentic products, varieties that are disappearing, the cooking of our ancestors, awakening fragments of memories, taught us that our roots are here"*.

Of course, agritourism affects the empowerment of women through several factors, encouraging entrepreneurship, self-confidence, independence and encouragement for education and training in this sector. In this context, women play an active role and are stronger in the private sector than men, mentioned by Arroyo et al. (2019). The managerial role or leadership skills are driven by factors such as promoting inclusiveness in the agritourism sector and taking the role of protagonist in rural communities where women do the hardest work (Bridges et al., 2023). Familiarity with women's rights and gender equality has had an impact on the inclusion of women in agro-tourism activities and the development of rural communities (Pécot et al., 2024).

Often the patriarchal structure and agrarian ideology have prevented women from being directly involved in the establishment and management of agritourism farms (Semali & Shakespeare, 2014). Albania inherited from the past the patriarchal structure of the family and it took years for this to change. 30 years ago, in rural areas, it was unthinkable for a woman to lead an agrarian business activity, but the situation has changed in recent years (Hall, 2000).

Supportive policies and grants regarding the empowerment of women in the agritourism

The presence of supportive policies, programs, and institutions can facilitate women's empowerment in agritourism. As indicated by Zoto et al. (2013) entrepreneurship in agritourism could be helped by the policy makers through the allocation of resources necessary to develop and commercialize their services. Insights could focus on the effectiveness of existing policies and institutional frameworks in promoting gender equality, addressing gender-specific barriers, and providing targeted support to women entrepreneurs and agritourism operators (Thien et al., 2009). Exploring the sustainability and resilience of women-led agritourism initiatives is critical. Insights may examine the environmental, social, and economic sustainability of agritourism practices, as well as women's adaptive strategies in response to external challenges (Nagy et al., 2017).

Only desire and initiative are not enough to set up an agritourism farm. Regarding this, the inclusion of women in such initiatives, as explained above, is related to many factors and conditions. An important role in strengthening women in the agritourism sector is also played by rural development policies and strategies that stimulate the inclusion and support of women who undertake entrepreneurship in agritourism (Costa et al., 2017).

In the last 10 years, Albania has had a sustainable development of tourism, including the development of agritourism, although the diversification of this sector in relation to tourism as a whole, is slower. The drafting of new policies and strategies for the development of agritourism has been successful, but if we emphasize in terms of gender equality, further improvements are required. In this direction, improvements have been made which have had the effect of supporting the role of women in agritourism by empowering them in rural communities (One Planet, 2024).

Answering to the ninth question about women who deal with agritourism sector if they have difficulties in obtaining grants, results from data show that in many cases, entrepreneur women are hindered by

issues of informality, often widespread in Albania, due to ongoing ownership problems in rural areas. Grant support for the empowerment of women in agritourism has influenced the increase in the number of enterprises and has improved the infrastructure and services for all tourists, creating sustainable development models of agritourism farms. Official authorities have affirmed their commitment to rural tourism, highlighting the ongoing need for infrastructure enhancements in remote regions. The Agricultural and Rural Development Agency has implemented targeted measures to support women in agritourism, allocating special financial assistance over the past ten years (ARDA, 2023). Regarding the support of government programs, financial assistance, agritourism and non-governmental enterprises for the empowerment and support of women in agrotourism activities, the questionnaire collected data that show that there were only a few farms that were supported with grants and programs.

In the last four years, the Ministry of Tourism and Environment in Albania has encouraged the construction of guesthouses as part of agritourism accommodation, supporting with grants and specific projects mainly in mountainous areas to geographically diversify this sector as well. The data shows that nearly 2/3 of the beneficiaries are women included in these projects (MTE, 2024).

The last question of the questionnaire has revealed special thoughts and opinions, which also highlight any problem which may have arisen as a result of the mistakes made in these years.

Agritourism can contribute to women's social empowerment by providing opportunities for networking, social interaction, and community engagement. Insights may explore the social networks and support systems that empower women in the sector, as well as the role of agritourism in challenging gender norms and fostering women's visibility and recognition in their communities (Hall, 2000; Savage et al., 2023).

The assessment of future aspirations has been related to the involvement of women in agritourism with the progress of entrepreneurship, the greater involvement of women as a challenge to establish gender equality in this sector as well. In addition to experience and goals for the future, future aspirations are often hindered by the conservative mentality on the skills and role of women in the dynamic sector of the rural economy. The study suggests agritourism is an activity that promotes gender equality and enhances the participation of well-educated women. Agritourism offers the path for skill development and capacity building among women, including hospitality management, culinary skills, marketing, and entrepreneurship. Insights may highlight the impact of training programs and capacity-building initiatives on women's empowerment and professional growth. According to the data of 2018 delivered by GIZ the participation of women in agritouristic initiatives was higher than man. From 2021 to 2023 the number of agritourism farms established by women was higher than those created by men (GIZ Albania, 2023).

Attention to improving the participation of women in decision-making in forest governance has gained prominence in development research as organisations, researchers, and policy-makers seek to integrate gender priorities into research, planning and policy (Manfre & Rubin, 2012). The concept of participation embodies several ideas, including inclusiveness, empowerment, democracy, and efficiency. A point often made in this literature is that equitable participation is necessary for the institutional efficiency of community-based agritourism sector. Johansson (2021) also found that the participation of women in agritourism networking improved their overall functioning to address economic challenges and social equity.

By delving into these insights, stakeholders can gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of women's empowerment in the agritourism sector in Albania, thereby informing strategies and interventions to enhance women's participation, networking, and impact in this growing industry. The policies undertaken in Albania regarding the empowerment of women in the agritourism sector are not sufficient because in some cases, they do not show importance in terms of gender by not including women in all projects, initiatives and the promotion of new businesses.

5. Conclusion

The results of the study and the analysis of the situation of the agritourism farms run by women show that agritourism is a catalyst for female empowerment and gender equity. It plays an important role in

developing the rural economy and encouraging incentives for women's entrepreneurship and self-employment. It is evident that in rural areas the empowerment of women plays a critical role in economic and social development. Women entrepreneurs of agritourism farms deserve to be recognized as important actors in the promotion and development of the agritourism sector. This type of diversification of agritourism where women are standing out in their roles as entrepreneurs, managers and in production activities is one of the integrative models of rural communities that has improved economic and social life. Empowering women not only benefits them individually but also increases the economic income of their families and contributes to overall national development. Therefore, this development model that overcomes the challenges of gender inequality requires continuous support with policies, grants, infrastructure, services to stimulate the involvement of more women in such enterprises.

The findings of the study suggest that policy-makers, practitioners and stakeholders should promote the empowerment of women through the development of agritourism. Priority should be given to the implementation of gender-responsive policies that address the specific needs and constraints faced by women in this sector. Furthermore, efforts should be made to promote women's leadership and decision-making roles within agritourism enterprises, to promote market access and value addition, to raise awareness of the importance of women's empowerment in agritourism, and to create mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating progress towards gender equality objectives.

Stakeholder groups should collaborate to provide tailored support services, mentoring programs and networking opportunities for women entrepreneurs in agritourism, while also advocating for gender-sensitive policies and investments in the sector. By fostering partnerships between government agencies, civil society organizations, private sector actors and academia, stakeholders can leverage resources and expertise to create an enabling environment for women's empowerment in agritourism, ultimately contributing to inclusive and sustainable development.

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