Women's Studies International Forum 79 (2020) 102340

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif

Women's perceptions of empowerment in Ramsar, a tourism destination in northern Iran

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Empowerment
Women
Occupation
Tourism development
Qualitative

ABSTRACT

Few researchers have accounted for the unique context (e.g., economic, socio-cultural) affecting women's perceptions of empowerment. Recognizing that tourism, particularly in growing economies provides a unique context within which empowerment may occur, a qualitative approach was employed to uncover Iranian women's overall perception of empowerment and whether it differed based on occupation (i.e., tourism vs. non-tourism, including homemakers). Overall, 10 unique perceptions of empowerment were identified, 2 of which (i.e., having unique behavioral characteristics and faith) are new to the literature. In addition, women differed in their perception of empowerment when occupation and perceived level of empowerment were considered. The results suggested researchers must not ignore socio-cultural facets of empowerment, the degree to which women perceive of themselves as empowered, and more when conducting research on factors affecting women's perception of empowerment.

Introduction

In response to the negative impacts of tourism (Mason, 2016; Mowforth & Munt, 2008), Edgell (2016) and other scholars have called for a sustainable approach to tourism development, which includes "empowerment" as a potential benefit to local communities frequented by tourists. Empowerment has been spotlighted as a fundamental human right (Narayan, 2005; United Nations (UN), 2015) which, from the perspective of women's studies scholars, includes agency (i.e., ability to make choices, enact decisions, and act upon what one desires) and encompasses instrumental values (Narayan, 2005) that theoretically lead to economic independency, skill improvement (e.g., communication, leadership) and nurturing, all of which help women to become influential in the course of their life and in their community. Empowerment is also context dependent suggests tourism scholars, and may manifest economically, psychologically, socially, and politically (e.g., Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017; Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004; Scheyvens, 1999). It is a construct that is particularly important to study in communities where individuals are discriminated against, suppressed, and repressed.

Some countries that have adopted tourism as an economic development strategy have experienced an increase in national GDP, foreign exchange, employment rate, and infrastructure development (Telfer & Sharpley, 2002). Employment opportunities (Duffy, Kline, Mowatt, & Chancellor, 2015); entrepreneurial activities and an increase in family income (Xue & Kerstetter, 2018); enhanced self- (Moswete & Lacey, 2015) and community-confidence (Kline, McGehee, & Delconte, 2018); a sense of pride about the local culture (Boley, Maruyama, & Woosnam, 2015; Boley & McGehee, 2014); the ability to make decisions due to a change in traditional gender relations (Movono & Dahles, 2017); and improved livelihoods (e.g., improved diet) (Stone & Nyaupane, 2017) are examples of tourism's contributions to communities and individuals. However, due to the varying political, socio-cultural, and economic conditions in countries that adopt tourism as an economic development strategy, as well as personal norms, which are usually nourished by discriminatory and unjust behaviors and practices, we posit women's experience and perception of empowerment may be different from that of men.

In 2015 the UN established gender equality and women's empowerment as the fifth Sustainable Development Goal due to discriminatory cultural, educational, employment and health practices throughout the world. Similar discriminatory practices have been identified in tourism, affecting gender equality and women's empowerment (Ferguson, 2011; Kinnaird & Hall, 1994; Tucker, 2007). For example, there is a huge gender gap between men and women in terms of economic and non-economic benefits of tourism development (United Nations World Tourism Organization: UNWTO, 2010). With respect to economic benefits, the likelihood of women being employed in tourism is two

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2020.102340
Received 23 May 2019; Received in revised form 29 November 2019; Accepted 20 January 2020

times that of men; however, women do not receive equal benefits (UNWTO, 2010). Women earn less income for the same job, occupy inferior positions, even if they are more educated, and are often hired for positions that can be characterized as a continuation of their house chores (e.g., housekeeping) (Baum, 2013; Foley, Grabowski, Small, & Wearing, 2018; Gentry, 2007). Hence, employment in tourism may not be a panacea for empowering women, particularly when accounting for culture. In one culture employment in the tourism industry may lead to empowerment but in another it could lead to more suppression (e.g., being beaten up for working outside the home; Arroyo, Barbieri, Sotomayor, & Knollenberg, 2019; Cornwall, 2003; Timothy, 2001). Even within the same culture, differences in empowerment may exist. While signs of empowerment such as an increase in awareness about women's rights, education, and employment are necessary to ensure women's empowerment, they may not be enough. In some cultures, women must use strategies (e.g., negotiation with men succumbing to their wills) to overcome cultural barriers and to live the life they desire (Ali, 2014).

While the UN has established gender equality and women's empowerment as a sustainable development goal, it is not clear whether working in the tourism industry has, from the perspective of women, contributed to their empowerment. Further, few scholars have documented women's perceptions of factors (e.g., having a job, income, freedom to make decisions) that contribute to empowerment, particularly amongst those who have gained employment within the tourism industry in a developing country. Thus, focusing on women's perception of empowerment as well as the factors that contribute to it is necessary as doing so may reveal what they expect out of life, how they experience or judge their quality of life, what their needs are, how they go through the empowerment journey, and more (Israel, Checkoway, Schulz, & Zimmerman, 1994; Paul, Niehoff, & Turnley, 2000). Adopting this focus will also provide community leaders and development practitioners with a much better understanding of their constituents.

In this study we explored Iranian women's perception of empowerment from an occupation lens for three primary reasons: (1) studies conducted with women have primarily used non-localized frameworks that can't account for their unique perceptions of empowerment; (2) little is known about Iranian women's perception of empowerment; and (3) few researchers have investigated the intersection of tourism development and empowerment of women in Iran. Keeping these justifications in mind as well as the fact that culture, context, and occupation have a powerful impact on perceptions of empowerment in Iran (Amiri, 2011; Simbar, Alizadeh, Hajifoghaha, & Dabiri, 2017), we chose to conduct our study in Ramsar, a coastal tourism destination in northern Iran, where women have worked with tourists for many years. We answered two research questions: “What are Iranian women's perceptions of empowerment?” and “Do Iranian women's perceptions of empowerment differ based on occupational context (i.e., tourism vs non-tourism)?”

Review of literature

How women progress towards or achieve empowerment has been of interest to researchers from a variety of disciplines. Foundational to this study are the perspectives of women's studies and tourism scholars as well as existing research addressing the nexus between tourism development and empowerment in developing countries, including Iran.

Two perspectives of empowerment

Women's studies scholars have viewed empowerment as: a tool for giving power to women who experience discrimination, oppression and poverty (Moghadam, 2007; Narayan, 2005); an agent for change (e.g., developing sense of self, the ability to negotiate and have influence) as well as decision making (Kabeer, 1999; Rowlands, 1997); and a means for access to resources as well as improved social status (Longwe, 2002). In developing countries, empowerment has been associated with increased awareness of and ability to stand up for one's rights; accessing education and employment opportunities; entrepreneurship; increasing self-confidence, self-respect, and mobility; improvement of communication skills; and involvement in decision-making (Bishop & Bowman, 2014; Chaudhary, Chani, & Pervaiz, 2012; Erman, Kalaycıoğlu, & Rittersberger-Tılıç, 2002; Ganle, Afriyie, & Segbefia, 2015; Jamal, Raihana, & Sultana, 2016). Unfortunately, such changes may be not enough on their own to ensure empowerment. There are situations, particularly in patriarchal cultures (Erman et al., 2002; Henry, 2011; Osmani, 2016), when economically independent women do not question inequality or lack of power (Sen & Mukherjee, 2014). Alternatively, they may respect the prevailing culture and use it to improve their quality of life. For these women, empowerment is about applying strategies such as careful negotiation with men and educating their children about the negative effects of gender inequities in a way that remains respectful of local norms and at the same time allows them to pursue their goals (Afshar, 2016; Ali, 2014). Hence, researchers must account for socio-cultural context and investigate empowerment from the perspective of local women when attempting to understand what women's lived experience of empowerment are (Alvi, 2005; Sharma, 2008; Syed, 2010).

Within the context of tourism, Aghazamani and Hunt (2017, p. 3) have defined empowerment as “a multidimensional, context-dependent, and dynamic process that provides humans, individually or collectively, with greater agency, freedom, and capacity to improve their quality of life as a function of engagement with the phenomenon of tourism.” It may manifest economically, psychologically, socially, and politically (Scheyvens, 1999). Economically, signs of empowerment may include increased employment, community control of financial benefits and productive assets, improvement in facilities, as well as having political influence (Coria & Calfucura, 2012; Ramos & Prideaux, 2014; Scheyvens, 1999). Psychologically, empowerment can be represented through residents' pride in their local traditions, an increased willingness to become educated and share their experiences and knowledge with tourists, and improved self-confidence and self-esteem (Boley & McGehee, 2014; Jensen, 2010; Maruyama, Woosnam, & Boley, 2016; Strzelecka, Boley, & Strzelecka, 2017). From a social perspective, empowerment might include a strengthened sense of cohesion, community spirit, involvement, and enhanced local control over tourism (Boley et al., 2015; Boley, Ayscue, Maruyama, & Woosnam, 2017; Coria & Calfucura, 2012; Ramos & Prideaux, 2014). Politically, researchers have suggested that empowerment has occurred when diverse interest groups (e.g., women and youth) have access to and a voice in decision-making, know their voice makes a difference in how tourism is developed, and have an outlet to share their concerns about tourism development (Farrelly, 2011; Weng & Peng, 2014). In 2014, Ramos and Prideaux (2014) argued for an environmental dimension of empowerment, which focuses on the environmentally conscious tourism practices controlled by local residents.

Tourism development and empowerment

One framework and one measurement instrument have guided the majority of research on tourism development and empowerment. In 1999, Scheyvens introduced a widely used theoretical framework highlighting social, psychological, political and economic forms of empowerment and disempowerment. Later, building off of Scheyvens' work, Boley and McGehee (2014) developed and validated a measurement instrument they called the Resident Empowerment Through Tourism Scale (RETS). Their scale does not account for economic empowerment nor has it been validated in a wide variety of cultural contexts (Boley et al., 2015).

Tourism development and empowerment for women

Focusing on women as service providers and as tourists, women's

studies scholars found that tourism contributed to their empowerment through improved sense of pride about themselves (Arroyo et al., 2019); gender parity in education (Nassani, Aldakhil, Abro, Islam, & Zaman, 2019); becoming self-employed (Movono & Dahles, 2017); increasing self-confidence (Panta & Thapa, 2018); being involved in decision-making (Tran & Walter, 2014); becoming independent and generating hope (Berdychevsky, Gibson, & Poria, 2013); acquiring the ability to control others (Annes & Wright, 2015); and challenging traditional patriarchal norms (Gentry, 2007; Radel & Hillman, 2018). Due to the context dependent nature of empowerment, patriarchal and capitalist cultures also have been deemed barriers to women's empowerment (Afshar, 2016; Osmani, 2016; Sen & Mukherjee, 2014; Syed, 2010; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012; Zuhur, 2003). This may be particularly true in Iran.

Tourism development and empowerment for women in Iran

Few researchers have investigated the intersection of tourism development and empowerment of women in Iran, particularly in areas with growing economies. Researchers have documented greater independence (Ghaniyan, Ghadiri-Masum, Motiei-Langerudi, & Zarafshani, 2010); a change in attitude (Imeni-Gheshlagh, Khani, & Hashemi, 2012); increased job opportunities, income, and business skills (Vosoughi & Ghasemi, 2015); increased awareness (Khajeh-Shahkuie, Khoshfar, & Karimi, 2012; Khani, 2012); and more. They've also recognized limited social and economic empowerment as a result of tourism development (Amiri, 2011; Yasouri & Vatankhah-Klouzari, 2015). These conflicting results may be due to various facilitators and inhibitors. In general, facilitators to women's empowerment have included having: a high school or advanced degree, family support, safety, cooperation in farm work, and/or the ability to earn and access money (Farzizadeh, Motevaseli, & Taleb, 2013; Koulaie & Taheri, 2012; Mahdavi & Khosroshahi, 2003; Rahmani, Zand-Razavi, Rabani, & Adibi, 2008). Inhibitors have encompassed limited job opportunities (Kalantari, Shabanali, & Soroushmehr, 2010); limited education/literacy (Khani & Ahmadi, 2009), legal support and communication networks (Ghanbari & Ansari, 2016); poor infrastructure (Kalantari et al., 2010); low self-esteem (Shakouri, Rafatjah, & Jafari, 2007); and challenging family and social mores (Farzizadeh et al., 2013).

Overall, women's empowerment research has been conducted using surveys with women living in socio-cultural and economic contexts different from Iran. Researchers have not always been forthcoming with the theory or framework informing their research and, to the knowledge of this research team, few have addressed women's perspective of empowerment, particularly with women living in areas impacted by tourism development. Thus, in this study Iranian women's perception of empowerment was explored using in-depth interviews. The women lived in Ramsar, a coastal tourism area in northern Iran.

Study purpose and method

The study area

Ramsar province is a popular tourism destination in northern Iran. At its center is the town of Ramsar, which has attracted domestic tourists for nearly 100 years, despite changes introduced during the reign of various leaders. For example, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941–1979) built on the efforts (e.g., development of a hotel and casino) of Reza Pahlavi (1925–1941) by adding an airport, other public services, and hosting the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of Importance in 1971 (Rangchiyan & Heidari, 2009; Sajadi, 1999). After Iran's revolution in 1979, tourism development ceased for 8 years due to the invasion of Iraq. Islamic values and codes (e.g., wearing a hejab, banning alcohol, destroying female statues) were enforced, altering tourism in Ramsar (Rangchiyan & Heidari, 2009). Development (e.g., shopping centers, water sports facilities) began again in the 1990s during Iran's Construction Era.

While tourism evolved in Ramsar, opportunities for women did not: approximately 1100 women had jobs outside the home in 2016 (Ramsar Cultural Heritage, Handicraft, and Tourism Organization, 2016[1]) and only one-third of the women working in hotels and restaurants were women (Ramsar Cultural Heritage, Handicraft, and Tourism Organization, 2016).

Women represent approximately one-half of the Iranian population. Outnumbering men attending and graduating from university (Aryan, 2012), Iranian women have used education as a tool for social and economic freedom, to leave home, and to improve their skills (Rostami-Povey & Povey, 2013). While many women have obtained advanced degrees and jobs in engineering, medicine, business management, and transportation (Bahramitash, 2009), as of 2014 they comprised only 18% of the labor force in Iran (World Bank, 2017). This low participation rate is associated with social norms (e.g., men are expected to be the "breadwinner"), lack of confidence in women as leaders, and cultural expectations that associate women with house work (Jazani, 2002 cited in Ketabi, Yazd khasti, & Farokhi-Rastabi, 2003; Moghadam, 2013). The participation rate in politics is more abysmal: Women held only 9 of 94 seats in Iran's congress and 10 of Iran's 90 ministerial positions in 2016 (World Economic Forum, 2016).

Given the dramatic gender gap in different aspects of Iranian life, documenting women's perception of empowerment and the factors that contribute to it is necessary and important. So, too, is accounting for occupational context (i.e., tourism vs. non-tourism), particularly in Ramsar where working outside the home in tourism and non-tourism positions is fairly common.

Study method

Believing the nature of reality is associated with what participants view differently about their experiences (Moustakas, 1994), we chose to use a phenomenological approach to address the purpose of this study. The lead researcher spent 18 days in the field collecting data. As much as possible she bracketed her beliefs, feelings and perceptions (Creswell, 2013) derived in part from having lived in Tehran, Iran much of her life, completed advanced degrees in Iran, and traveled outside of the country for pleasure and education. She also acknowledged that her notion of an empowered Iranian woman is a woman who: does not succumb to traditional, patriarchic, and religious beliefs and behaviors that seriously constrain her agency; attempts to gain knowledge about whatever is of interest to her; and uses her abilities to develop her skills, reach her goals, and have a better life.

Pilot study

Phenomenological research depends in part on asking questions that elicit lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). Thus, we pilot tested 16 questions through interviews with four Iranian women living in Tehran who differed in age, educational background, and occupation. The lead researcher began by asking the women to "think about a powerful woman." She then asked them to: (a) describe a powerful woman, and (b) indicate whether they perceive of themselves as a powerful woman and the reason(s) for their perception. Results indicated using the term "powerful" was problematic. Women suggested those who have power often try to impose their will on others. They also differentiated between the terms "power" and "ability," arguing that each individual has ability, but one may use it and one may not. Based on participants' feedback and their translation of the words power and ability, the word, "powerful" was replaced by "empowered." In Farsi, an empowered person is one who has the ability to do something, which is similar to

[1] Information was obtained throughout an interview session with a tourism expert working in Ramsar Handicraft, Cultural Heritage, and Tourism Organization. There was no report regarding tourism statistics.

the "agency" dimension (i.e., ability to negotiate, have influence and make decisions) of empowerment presented by both women's studies and tourism scholars (see Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017; Kabeer, 1999; Rowlands, 1997).

Sampling and data collection

To ensure that sub-groups of women were included in our study we purposefully stratified the sample by occupational context (tourism and non-tourism, which included homemakers) using a snowball sampling method (i.e., identifies cases of interest from people who know people; Creswell, 2013), which is often used with hard to access, reluctant populations (Bernard, 2013). In Ramsar women generally do not trust strangers; thus, the lead researcher began sampling with a woman who was referred by a colleague. After completing an interview with her, the lead researcher asked for additional contacts in each of the occupational sub-groups (tourism and non-tourism). This same procedure was followed with each woman until the lead researcher felt she had enough information to elucidate empowerment (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Dukes (1984) suggested the sample size in each sub-group should be from three to ten. The final sample consisted of 40 women: 20 working in tourism (e.g., hotel/travel agency owner, hotel/travel agency staff, handicraft maker) and 20 working in non-tourism jobs (e.g., confectionary owner, dietitian, psychologist), 9 of whom were homemakers (see Table 1 for more detail). The decision to include homemakers was to be inclusive of all women who work in contexts other than tourism. The 40 women ranged in age from 21 to 68 and the majority was university educated. Being university educated in Ramsar does not mean that the women were from specific strata/class.

Using a responsive interviewing model (Rubin & Rubin, 2011), one-on-one in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Farsi from July to August 2017. A digital recorder was used to record interviews, which lasted one to 4 h. In an effort to put women at ease and to develop trust in the lead researcher, women were first asked to "think about a woman you think has made progress in her life and tell me why you think she is empowered." This was followed by six questions focused on general issues of empowerment (e.g., Do you feel you are empowered? If yes, why? If no, why not?), four questions on impediments and supporters of empowerment (e.g., Are you involved in decision-making at home and/or your workplace? If yes, how? If no, why not?) and, for women working in tourism, two questions about the role of tourism in empowerment (e.g., What does the community (neighbors, friends) think about you working in tourism?). The questions were created based on previous research by Kabeer (1999, 2011); Longwe (2002); Telfer and Sharpley (2002); Tickemayer and Kusujiarti (2012); and Annes and Wright (2015).

Data analysis

Prior to analysis, data were validated through member checking and peer review evaluation (i.e., listening to all of the interviews multiple times and asking participants questions about comments they made during the interviews). In addition, an Iranian fluent in English and Farsi was asked to review translations of three randomly selected transcripts. Minor modifications were made based on interpretations of slang.

Two members of the research team read each transcript three times to obtain an overall feeling for the results. They then independently identified significant phrases or sentences pertaining to the lived experience of women's empowerment, met to jointly create a code list, and independently re-coded the transcripts using a line-by-line coding strategy (Bernard, 2013; Charmaz, 2014) to ensure inter-coder reliability (Creswell, 2013) and to compare codes. The formulated codes were clustered into themes and integrated to construct in-depth descriptions. When data were reviewed in terms of occupational context, it became clear that homemakers slightly differed in their perceptions of empowerment. Thus, their responses were highlighted separately from women who worked in other industries.

Methodological rigor was attained through verification (i.e., literature searches, obtaining an appropriate sample, keeping field notes, bracketing past experiences, and identifying negative cases; Meadows & Morse, 2001) and validation (i.e., using multiple methods of data collection, data coding and analysis by multiple researchers; and member checks by five study participants who read the findings including themes, codes, and their descriptions; Creswell, 2013). In the findings that follow, confidentiality is ensured through using pseudonyms for participants' real names.

Findings

Overall perceptions of empowerment

Every woman suggested working or being busy, having unique behavioral characteristics, and being a "game changer" were elements of empowerment. A majority (85%) said an empowered woman holds a position in society, is independent, and supports her family. Fifty seven to 76% said an empowered woman is able to interact with others, is educated and informed, and makes progress. Having faith was linked to empowerment by nearly one-third of the women (Table 2).

Empowered women work, have unique behavioral characteristics, and are game changers

Empowered women work. They "… apply [their] abilities outside of home while some like to be active at their home" (Aghaie). They also build upon "…whatever skill [they have] whether it is raising plants or handicrafts" (Fazili), even ownership or management of property. Through working and being busy women gained experience that enabled them to learn about themselves—"I learned a lot and I learned how not to be exploited" (Kahani)—as well as how to be independent—"…a man cannot meet the demands of his wife and kids [even] if he has the best job. Thus, a woman should certainly have a job" (Khosravi). Others indicated that working outside the home allowed them to feel "useful" by "…having a positive influence on others' lives" (Moini), meeting their and their family's expenses (Jasemi, Sarang), and supporting their families (Elhami).

Empowered women have unique behavioral characteristics such as being moral, positive, willing to take risks, and responsible. Study participants did not agree, however, on the specific features comprising morality. For some women, having a good temperament was a synonym for morality. According to Saiedi, "being good-tempered makes you happy and it influences you and your audience." For other women, being kind, generous and helpful to others exemplified morality. Closely aligned with being good tempered was being positive, often illustrated through smiling, which to Shamekhi and Saiedi indicates loveliness and healthiness.

Being willing to take risks was another behavioral characteristic of empowered women. For Sarang and others this meant facing challenges such as buying rice on one's own or selling products on the street or in new markets. Taking risks also meant being responsible. Empowered women were expected to complete jobs at home as well as in the workplace: Moini, carried heavy boxes of water because she didn't want to say that as a woman she "shouldn't carry the boxes."

Empowered women are game changers; they are influential, challenge norms, initiate or pioneer something, and are able to face challenging situations. Pardisi, a village head, was considered empowered because "she has the authority and the power she believes she has… Mrs. Pardisi even criticizes men. She walks in front of men with this authority. That is why she is powerful" (Khosravi). Empowered women also influence their husband's and other's mindset about women's roles by managing and contributing to their family finances (Haamedi), showing that "[they have]… abilities" (Khalili), and "do[ing] the job [they] want to do and… [also] be[ing] beneficial at home" (Sarang).

Empowered women also have "changed the game" by being the first

Table 1
Participant profile.

Name	Age	Marital status	Education	Employment status	Length of residence
Women working in tourism					
Ayda	54	Married	Third level of guidance school[a]	Self-employed: Grocery shop owner	54
Pooneh	36	Married	High school without diploma	Self-employed: Grocery shop owner	36
Kasraie	35	Married	Master in Chemical engineering	Self-employed: Owner of a booking website	35
Roshani	28	Single	Master in Tourism management	Museum employee: Museum guide	28
Rostami	34	Single	Bachelor	Museum employee: Museum guide	34
Peymani	48	Married	Diploma	Self-employed: Costume shop owner	48
Keyhani	50	Married	Certificate of third level of guidance school	Self-employed: Crochet weaver	50
Jasemi	30	Married	High school diploma	Costume shop employee: Tailor and salesperson	7
Rezaie	30	Single	Bachelor in accounting	Travel agent	30
Hoseini	33	Married	Master of Information Technology	Reservation employee in a hotel	22
Ebrahimi	56	Married	High school diploma	Self-employed: Owner of a hotel	5
Simaie	50	Married	Expelled from university due to her political activities, high school diploma in economics	Self-employed: Chef and instructor	50
Aghaie	35	Single	Master's degree in history	Tourism expert in Ramsar Tourism Organization	35
Deyhimi	33	Single	Bachelor in arts	Street handicraft vendor	33
Kahani	31	Married	Master in hotel management	Cashier and receptionist in a hotel	31
Sahraie	34	Married	Bachelor in English	Self-employed: Owner of a travel agency	34
Fazili	44	Married	High school diploma	Housekeeping employee in a hotel	44
Ghasemi	late 20s	Married	Master in Food Quality Control	Tourism expert in Ramsar Tourism Organization	20
Rastegari	33	Single	Bachelor in political sciences	Manager of a souvenir shop	5
Moini	34	Single	Master of business administration	Head of reception in a hotel	13
Women working in other industries					
Jenabi	46	Married	High school without diploma	Self employed	30
Zahraie	43	Married	Master of education management	Advisor to Ramsar Governor on women's issues	43
Khosravi	33	Married	Bachelor in Environmental engineering	Self-employed: Owner of a chicken farm and fashion designer	22
Khalili	34	Married	Master's degree	Self-employed: Owner of a kindergarten	34
Tina	39	Divorced	Master student	Employee in a trading organization	50
Mirzaie	49	Married	High school diploma	Self-employed: Owner of a confectionary	20
Shamekhi	28	Single	Bachelor in psychology	Social worker in a hospital	5
Gholizadeh	27	Married	Master in Nutrition	Self-employed: Dietitian- nutritionist	3
Ghanbari	30	Married	Bachelor of social sciences	Office manager for town council	30
Saiedi	46	Married	Master of psychology	Self-employed: Founder of an NGO, family consultant-instructor	18
Pardisi	39	Married	Bachelor of English	Village head and homemaker	39
Homemakers					
Asemani	50	Married	High school diploma	Homemaker	18
Arabi	52	Married	Bachelor of Education	Homemaker-Retired teacher	42
Elhami	63	Married	High school without diploma	Homemaker	63
Haamedi	48	Married	Second grade in guidance school	Homemaker	28
Sarang	47	Married	High school diploma	Homemaker	47
Parizi	24	Married	High school diploma	Homemaker	5
Hamidi	52	Married	Guidance school certificate	Homemaker	52
Jasemi	60	Married	High school education without diploma	Homemaker	60
Hamzeie	39	Married	Bachelor in psychology	Homemaker	39

[a] Guidance school is the second educational level after primary school in the old Iranian education system. It included three years.

or the only woman to do something. Rostami, for example, introduced the first official cabinet making class for women, and Sahraie was the first female employee to attend the board of managers meeting in the Ramsar Hotel after which she ran a successful travel agency. The significance of these and other women being a pioneer was that they had courage (Hoseini).

Empowered women are able to face challenges because they "are creative…" suggested Ghasemi. Their creativity is linked to their "beautiful mind" and ability to "create motivation for [themselves] and others" (Ebrahimi). In addition, women who creatively face challenging situations are strong. They are able to interact with and manage other employees, even if they are men (Rastegar); fight for themselves when their behavior is not consistent with predefined societal norms (Deyhimi); or attend school while running a start-up (Simaie).

Empowered Women Hold Positions in Society, are Independent, and Support Their Family.

Empowered women who hold positions in society are trusted. Pooneh and Rastegari were so trusted by distributors, other colleagues and business people that they were given products and loans/investments. This trust may be a result of their philanthropic activities or behavior such as involvement with mosque activities (Elhami and Jasemi) or "not forget [ting to] love people, …help compatriots, neighbors, [and] friends.. and transfer[ing] whatever she knows…" and [not] differentiat[ing] between the poor and the rich" or between the "good or bad" (Arabi, Hamzeie, and Pardisi). Being philanthropic as well as good and moral (Keyhani and Elhami), religious (Jasemi), and receiving praise from local community members (Rastegari) led to popularity, which also resulted in holding a position in society.

Empowered women are independent, both financially and intellectually. Financially independent women earned their own income which allowed them to: "stand on [their] own two feet and not be dependent on [their] family" (Moini) or husband (Arabi and Keyhani); "make plans for [themselves]…" (Rastegari); have the "power to play with money and invest" (Sarang); and contribute to their family's finances (Pooneh). Financial independence also allowed women to contribute to society. Khosravi "hired four workers instead of one," even though she did not need them. Despite the good that many women associated with financial independence, there were naysayers. Kahani

Table 2
List of themes with representative statements.

Percentage[a] of women who cited theme	Theme	Sample statement
100%	Working or being busy	An empowered woman may "like to work in the society and apply [her] abilities outside of home while some like to be active at their home."
	Having unique behavioral characteristics	"Being good-tempered makes you happy and it influences you and your audience."
	Being a game changer	She "walks around [the] street[s] from morning to night and visits stores… Men are like bees to her, she has the authority [and] the power that she believes she has …Mrs. Pardisi even criticizes men, she walks in front of men with this authority. That is why she is powerful."
85%	Holds a position in society	"Not forget [ting to] love people, …help compatriots, neighbors, [and] friends as far as she can, and transfer whatever she knows…"
	Is independent	She should not "have parasite life, and stick to a person and get nourished." (Economically independent) "The greatest value I see in a woman… is being self-reliant, having independence, and that the person can decide for herself alone and can handle problems… That [she] can think…" (Intellectually independent)
	Supports her family	"There is no time that [my husband] does something without having my advice."
57%–76%	Able to interact with others	Interacting with people is what makes women "learn some tricks or get to know a special social level or subcultures in the society by working outside the home."
	Is educated and informed	"Those who are educated in the university got more scientific knowledge than those that did not enter university. Using that scientific knowledge can help [them to] make progress at work."
	Makes progress	"Life became better and had not collapsed [even though they] owed a lot of money, [and her] sir was in jail" because she had obtained a job and become an empowered woman.
33%	Has faith	"If [I] don't have trust in God, God will never help me. It is said you move and I give you. I don't think that if they don't have trust, they can be [an] entrepreneur and empowered. If they don't have it, they fail in the middle of the road because…it makes them to have more perseverance. Our main perseverance is God. God is taking my hand…"

[a] Refers to the maximum percentage of participants whose comments were represented through this theme.

suggested, "an empowered woman does not necessarily need to be economically independent. If she is empowered she can take money from her husband's hand…" Correspondingly, Khosravi said, "[The] financial manager of my work is my husband. This way I feel more comfortable… This way his pride is protected."

Intellectual independence was not something that automatically came with financial independence. It was linked to being self-reliant, having independence…" and being able to handle her problems on her own (Hamzeie). It is also about women having their own thoughts and opinions: "When [a wife] expresses her opinions to her husband, he will realize that she can be superior to him and she can teach him…" (Ebrahimi).

Empowered women support their family by managing and contributing income to their household and giving advice and support to family members, including their husbands. For Simaie it took a long time to realize that she "[was] stronger than her husband" and needed to find a job she liked in order to contribute income to and manage her household. Others focused on their children and family members. For example, Jenabi used her income from running a home-based business to send her children to university, meet their demands, and take care of her in laws.

Empowered women also give advice to their husbands. Rastegari's empowered mother provided her father with "constructive advice" because "If [her father] did not consult with her [mom] or [he] ignored [her] mom's opinion he would fail." Empowered women also support their husbands by staying with them, despite difficult conditions. Jenabi initiated a home-based business as soon as her husband went bankrupt and Jasemi, whose husband was a governmental employee, helped her husband deal with their expenses by working on other people's farms. According to Jasemi, "the backbone of the family is the woman. Turks say that without a man the family can survive but without a women a family will collapse."

Empowered Woman Interact, are Educated, Informed, and Make Progress.

Empowered women are comfortable interacting with a broad range of people, which Fazili said, "make[s] [them] become known." Interacting has helped them to "learn some tricks or get to know a special social level or subcultures in the society…" (Kahani). To be able to accomplish this, however, women had to be assertive. For Saiedi, being assertive involved "expressing [her] opposing idea as a human" and "[not] accepting everything right away." For other women, assertiveness was important in their interactions with men because it allowed them to showcase their strength and increase their credibility with community members (Peymani), husbands (Khosravi, Simaie, Zahraie), and family members (Asemani, Pardisi). Study participants also believed that being sociable was characteristic of empowered women. Pardisi felt "good" when she participated in community events because doing so is motivational and "increases happiness and the hope for life."

Empowered women also asked for support to overcome their problems. They took out loans from the local government and public organizations to help them run their home-based or local business. They also asked for advice from unknown businessmen.

Empowered women are educated and informed. Learning and becoming educated through exposure to information played a key role in empowering women. Jasemi and Moini, amongst others, mentioned that they were able to become successful through involvement in community activities and/or reading books. Their success led to an increase in self-confidence, which helped them to legally "get what they deserve" (Hamidi). Information helped Jenabi to raise her children and to give advice to her friends, and Jasemi to confidently express her ideas and to progress at work. As a woman whose father did not allow her to further her studies after high school, Elhami acknowledged, "If I had more education, I would like to be an employee." Other women, however, felt education did not contribute to the empowerment of women. According to Deyhimi, education "is part of a process that everyone should have…" and it does not guarantee success.

Empowered women make progress. When describing how women progress, study participants tended to compare their family life now with their situation in the past. For example, Pooneh said her life had become better because she had obtained a job. Simaie said she is "making progress every day" because she has reached her goal of running her own kitchen. A number of women said "having successful kids" (Zahraie) was an indicator of progression and thus empowerment. Simaie helped her son who was a drug addict to rehabilitate and also provided a source of income for his family. Women who had built a

career from nothing were also considered to be making progress. Using her sister as an example, Roshani explained how hard she had worked to establish a cabinet making certificate program for women, which is traditionally male-dominated.

Empowered woman have faith

Women also mentioned that empowered women "have strong faith" without which they "can't be empowered or [an] entrepreneur" (Zahraie). Without god as "a superior force in life" and "a hope that can always help you" (Pardisi), women may have mental health challenges (Khosravi) limited optimism and patience (Arabi), even anti-social behavior (Jasemi). According to Ghanbari, "faith leads to a sense of being supported… If you take faith away [you may reach a dead end]… If you have faith in God you will attempt again and reach [a] result."

Are women empowered?

Women responded to the question, "Are you empowered"? in three ways: "Yes, I am empowered," "I am somewhat empowered," or "No, I am not empowered." Those who said they are empowered linked their empowerment to financial independence, improvement/use of their skills, work/being active, and being influenced by their family. Deyhimi' s financial independence provided her with the ability to "[buy] many things for [herself] that many others, like [her] sisters, may not be able to buy." Financial independence allowed Rastegari to do whatever she wants to do. However, it was not easy for some women to become financially independent. Rostami who was one of the first female cabinet makers in Iran feared her cabinet making course would not make it in the end. But through support from her family and friends she was able to run the course. Fazili went through hardship as well: she experienced a divorce and was left to raise her daughter herself. She proudly said, "I am not dependent to anyone and I don't like someone to help me."

Working and being active also contributed to women's empowerment. Roshani started her job without any practical experience but improved her language and computer skills, which allowed her to run her own business. Moini maintained a seriousness about her job, which she said contributed to her empowerment: "In our culture, if women are not serious, they will not be taken seriously." Simply moving forward contributed to Peymani's empowerment. As she said, "Water which moves never becomes stinky. Empowerment is like this water. When you are active in whatever amounts you attempt, you earn the same amount of output."

Women's family members also contributed to their empowerment. Asemani's grandmother was a role model for her as she "was a female manager." Women in Saiedi's family created a strong environment for her to be independent because they were assertive, they talked in front of men, and, in many cases, the men were influenced by their decisions. Other women, like Ebrahimi, were supported by their husbands, which contributed to their empowerment.

Women who were somewhat empowered focused on what they lacked. For example, Jasemi did not have a university degree, Hoseini could not find a job related to her studies, and Kahani had a job related to her studies, but she wanted more experience and professional education; thus, all three women felt they were only somewhat empowered. The inability to balance work/education and household duties was another reason women felt somewhat empowered. For Jasemi, marriage had stopped her from attending university because she was unable to create a balance between housework and her studies, despite her husband's encouragement. Zahraie and Sahraie felt the same. In addition, Hoseini's resistance to prevailing socio-cultural norms related to marriage (e.g., allowing parents to pay for marriage and post marriage traditional ceremonies; not asking for a divorce) contributed to her belief that she was somewhat empowered.

Women who said they were not empowered had not achieved their goals and lacked self-confidence. Rezaie, for example, was unable to find a job related to her bachelor's degree. She believed she would become successful "if [she had] wanted something and [she had] obtained that and [she had] become successful in that." "Weak will" had led to Parizi's decision not to attend law school. For other women like Hamidi and Tina, shyness and social comparison resulted in a lack of self-confidence and thus a belief that they were not empowered.

Differences in perception of empowerment based on occupational context

All of the women, regardless of occupational context, linked empowerment to working or being busy, unique behavioral characteristics, and being a game changer. Women working in tourism linked empowerment to having interaction with people from different cultures, social interaction and having financial and intellectual independence. Women working in other industries or in their home (i.e., homemakers) were more inclined to say empowerment was rooted in knowledge, learning, and education (i.e., being educated and informed). All of the women who saw having faith as integral to empowerment were homemakers.

While occupational context had some effect on women's perception of empowerment, it became apparent that addressing differences based on this alone was too simplistic. Thus, we reviewed the results based on both occupational context and women's perceptions of their own empowerment.

Differences in Perceptions Based on Perception of Empowerment and Occupational Context.

When women were asked, "Are you empowered," they indicated, "yes, I am empowered," "yes, I am somewhat empowered," "no, I am not empowered" or, in some cases, were uncomfortable answering the question. The majority of women who were employed in tourism (80%) and all but one of the women employed in other industries felt they were "empowered" or "somewhat empowered). This was true of only 44% of homemakers (Table 3). Three women—one employed in tourism and two homemakers—were not comfortable commenting on their empowerment; they felt others should make this assessment (Table 3).

Those who were employed, either in tourism or a non-tourism job, and who felt they were empowered had similar perspectives about empowerment. Both groups linked empowerment to working or being busy, being a game changer, holding a position in society and supporting her family. Both working groups who felt they were somewhat empowered, however, tended to focus on what they lacked, especially their inability to attain their goal of further education, more work experience, or a specific job. They also felt they were somewhat empowered because of their inability to balance obligations at work and at home, and socio-cultural norms.

Table 3
Level of empowerment[a].

Occupational context	Empowered	Somewhat empowered	Not Empowered	Unwilling to express
Employed in tourism (N = 20)	11 (55%)	5 (25%)	3 (15%)	1 (5%)
Employed in other industries (N = 11)	6 (55%)	4 (36%)	1 (9%)	0 (0%)
Homemaker (N = 9)	3 (33%)	1 (11%)	3 (33%)	2 (22%)[b]

[a] This information was extracted from analysis of interview data.
[b] Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Women employed in tourism and who felt they were not empowered linked their lack of empowerment to their inability to finding a desired job, attend university, and more, which often led to a loss of self-confidence and an unsatisfactory life. Woman who worked in other industries suggested their lack of empowerment was due to their inability to multi-task (e.g., take care of family, attend university, work, and socialize).

Discussion

Women described empowerment in 10 different ways, which is uncommon, and likely due to the inductive nature of this study. The Iranian women who participated in this study indicated that empowerment is linked to working/being busy/having a job (Movono & Dahles, 2017; Muldoon, 2018); financial/intellectual independence (Caparros, 2018); supporting ones family (Malhorta, Schuler, & Boender, 2002); and being educated or informed (Goldman & Little, 2015). While supporting ones family has been recognized as a form of empowerment previously, Malhorta and her colleagues viewed it as an economic form of support. In this study, many women indicated empowered women support their families by taking care of their husband, children and doing house chores, suggesting researchers can't ignore socio-cultural facets of empowerment when conducting research with women.

Women also linked empowerment to being a game changer, which included challenging norms and/or influencing others (Ganle et al., 2015; Kabeer, 2011; Kim et al., 2007; Swain & Wallentin, 2009); holding a position in society (Goldman & Little, 2015; Longwe, 2002); being able to interact with others (Annes & Wright, 2015; Vizcaino Suarez, 2018); and making progress in life (Movono & Dahles, 2017). These empowerment themes, which speak more directly to women's interaction within their society, reveal that even a patriarchic and traditional culture can nurture empowered women. This is not to suggest that we are supportive of prohibitive, traditional and patriarchic practices that prevent women from experiencing empowerment. Instead, our results highlight that women have and can share their own perspective regarding empowerment, which matters.

Having unique behavioral characteristics and faith were empowerment themes revealed for the first time in this study. Good-tempered women were perceived as popular, could communicate with people, and consequently were able to resolve their own issues or help others find solutions to their problems. Bravery and responsibility were additional behavioral characteristics associated with empowerment. Brave and responsible women nurtured, applied, even extended their skills, which led to independence and an ability to lead. The appearance of this theme speaks to a more inclusive view of empowerment. Women do not think working and being educated and informed is enough to be empowered. One must also be able to engage with and support others in the community.

In terms of faith, Iranians have been religious (e.g., Zoroastrianism, Islam) throughout their history. Women in this study who linked faith to empowerment indicated that believing in an external source (e.g., God, holy Emams) created optimism and hope that they would not be alone in their hardships. In a society in which many women experience dependency, believing in an external force to survive is not surprising, Further, having faith may help women to be hopeful, patient, and persevere, which arguably helps them handle their hardships.

We recommend conducting additional ethnographic studies with women living in a patriarchic society to validate the new as well as other empowerment themes uncovered in this study. According to Creswell (2013), an ethnographic approach will allow for deeper understanding of the empowerment processes women go through; why women who maintain their gendered roles feel they are empowered; the impacts of social and political factors on perceptions of empowerment; changing perceptions of empowerment over time (e.g., tourism season, year to year); the influence of life span on women's perception of empowerment; and, ultimately, the data necessary to develop realistic and context-based strategies for the empowerment of women.

Differences in perception of empowerment based on occupational context

Women who worked in tourism indicated empowerment is linked to self-confidence, creativity, and sociability. This finding aligns with studies conducted by Amiri (2011), Heydari-Sareban and Maleki (2014), Imeni-Gheshlagh et al. (2012), and Vosoughi and Ghasemi (2015). Women's self-confidence likely was derived from daily interactions with domestic and international tourists, exposing them to different cultural mores. Creativity, on the other hand, was reflected in women's ability to find solutions through tourism for challenges they encountered. They have been able to start new businesses and earn praise from members of their community, all of which has led to greater social standing in Ramsar. It should be noted that tourism development in Ramsar has not been a panacea for women. As Tosun (2000) found, women have had financial problems (e.g., lacking money and financial resources) and been forced to give up on their ideas. Tourism has also resulted in negative perceptions of non-local cultures amongst some women who directly interact with tourists.

While we were able to document differences in perception of empowerment based on occupational context, why were there so few? Researchers should continue this line of research to document whether the results are unique to women in Ramsar, women working in tourism destinations, etc. Further, researchers should address whether empowerment amongst women working in tourism is a *byproduct of tourism development* and, if yes, whether their empowerment changes over time. Following these lines of research will enhance the literature and provide insight to local decision makers and officials who must develop practical strategies to empower women in communities experiencing tourism development.

Because women's perception of their own level of empowerment was in part linked to their occupation, additional analyses were conducted. The most interesting results were obtained from women who perceived they were “somewhat” or “not at all” empowered. In both cases the discussion about empowerment changed from a focus on positives associated with being empowered to a focus on what is lacking (e.g., inability to find a job or multi-task). When women did not achieve what they wanted (e.g., higher education, ability to contribute to the family), they did not feel completely empowered. Hence, the notion of empowerment was integrally linked to women's expectations of themselves and whether they had achieved their personal goals.

The notion that women in this study perceived of empowerment as a leveled experience (i.e., empowered, somewhat empowered, and not empowered) is important. The well-cited Scheyvens' template has viewed empowerment as a zero-sum concept, ignoring the notion that women can perceive of empowerment at multiple levels. Future research should continue to treat empowerment as a leveled experience as not doing so limits our understanding of and ability to create conditions for empowerment. It should also continue to focus on the household- rather than the community-level as we've done in this study. Continuing to adopt our approach will help researchers and policy makers to better understand women's empowerment and to develop strategies that will enable women to make household decisions within the confines of local traditions and practices.

Limitations

Due to the nature of snowball sampling, the results may have reflected perceptions of women from the same walk of life. However, we strategically chose women from two different groups (i.e., working in tourism and working in other industries, which included homemakers) in an effort to enhance the diversity of the sample. Second, presence of a third party in some interviews, which is common in Ramsar, might have influenced women's answers. The lead researcher (i.e.,

interviewer) did not directly ask the third party to leave the interview (acknowledging cultural mores) and instead probed by asking additional questions. Despite her efforts, some participants did not open up and responded, "I don't want to go into detail." Third, the interviewer's appearance, accent derived from growing up in Tehran, and being a solo traveler doing research might have affected responses she received during the interviews. The researcher made every effort to change her appearance by removing jewelry and wearing clothes which did not tag her as "a Tehrani girl" (i.e., a rich girl with no pain).

Conclusion

We explored Iranian women's perception of empowerment in a number of unique ways. First, we acknowledged that empowerment is context dependent and that the nature of reality is associated with what participants view differently about their experiences (Moustakas, 1994), and used a phenomenological approach. Second, because few researchers have investigated the intersection of tourism development and empowerment of women in Iran, we collected data from women working in different occupational contexts (i.e., tourism vs. non-tourism). Third, we gained greater insight to women's perceptions of empowerment by talking to them at the household rather than the community level. Results reinforced the importance of using a phenomenological approach, which accounts for socio-cultural context. Throughout history Iran has had a culture that is patriarchic and devoutly religious which, in this study, impacted women and their perception of empowerment and presented new ways of thinking about empowerment. For instance, many of the women in this study believed that contributing to gendered roles (e.g., doing housework and supporting one's husband as "head of the household") is a sign of empowerment, as is faith. The fact that faith is linked to empowerment, a result that has not been reported elsewhere, reinforces the role culture plays not only on day-to-day life, but also the way in which women view themselves.

If we build on the finding that women's perception of empowerment is influenced by their culture as well as the argument that empowerment can be derived through collective action processes (Zimmerman, 1995), women in Ramsar, many of whom have worked alongside men, should consider forming groups of men and women who together can collectively act towards a common goal. Doing this may help to reduce ignorance about women's contribution to all facets of society, help facilitate problem solving processes, and decrease the likelihood of men sabotaging processes designed to empower women.

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