



Power and Empowerment: community-based tourism and the perception of empowerment experienced by women in the rural village of Paramin, Trinidad & Tobago

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Abstract

Empowerment as a theory has been studied within the tourism industry in many dimensions such as social constructs. However, in the Caribbean, gender-focused studies on women's role in tourism have mainly focused on sex tourism. Women meanwhile play a larger and crucial part in the tourism workforce in the Caribbean, the most tourism-dependent zone in the world according to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC). As a marginalised group, their activity in community-based tourism sectors provide benefits for them that spread to their wider community and support their empowerment. These activities can provide new niche tourism activities, preserve cultural heritage as well as provide benefits such as employment for other marginalised societal groups.

Taking into account the lack of research in this area, studies must be done in order to support sustainable tourism policy development in the Caribbean. This dissertation thus has the goal of examining the perception of empowerment experienced by women in tourism businesses in rural Trinidad. Using the village of Paramin as the backdrop, semi open interviews were conducted to give voice to the village women's experiences and shed light on the way they have perceived their empowerment through the leveraging of their tourism-related businesses and activities for tourism development in Trinidad & Tobago.

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Introduction

The value that the tourism industry brings to a country or territory cannot be understated, especially in the Caribbean region, where it is known to be the most tourism-dependent (WTTC, 2022). This vast importance means that regional governments are fully aware of this value, where their economic health is reliant on visitors to their shores and lands. The existing data for this is stark: proceeds from tourism in the Caribbean region, according to the Inter-American Development Bank, can account for 3% GDP in vast land territories like Guyana, to upwards of 55% GDP in The Bahamas while Trinidad & Tobago sits to the lower end of the spectrum, with 7.8% GDP.

Trinidad & Tobago's economic health mainly relies on its hydrocarbon reserves, but the country is now looking at ways to diversify its revenue streams, and the push towards a more resilient and attractive tourism product beckons. As such, encouraging and supporting sustainable tourism actions to bolster the regional industry is necessary, such as community-based tourism and the greater inclusion and participation of women throughout the tourism value chain. The inclusion of marginalised groups such as women are critical to support sustainable development goals, yet progress is tardy in arriving.

Women's presence in regional tourism outweighs their male counterparts yet their impact is seemingly underappreciated. Their overall potential and the role they play in the global workforce is unfortunately not being leveraged – it is argued that due to gender inequalities and gaps, global economies are suggested to be missing out on as much as \$160 trillion (Abdi, 2019) as women shoulder additional burdens and are excluded or restricted to certain levels within industries. The same can be applied to the global tourism industry where women comprise more than 50% of the tourism workforce (Pino and La Touche, 2023), and the scale is even more stark in the Caribbean – for example, between 57% – 70% of employment in the accommodation and food services sectors in the region are women (World Bank, 2025).

Women's untapped potential is also not being studied – there is a dearth of research related to their role in tourism, especially it relates to their empowerment and especially in the Caribbean. Currently the academic focus on women's role in tourism is mainly linked to sex work and as such, their relationship with the industry through other lenses such as empowerment has not been researched extensively. This gap in the literature must be addressed in order to highlight the highly interconnected dynamics of women in tourism and their potential on the growth of the industry. In order to boost their potential and truly empower them, their challenges and opportunities to be leveraged must be analysed. Women's empowerment is critical from an economic standpoint but also from a social one and unleashes a multiplier effect that stems from their increased involvement in society. Women usually face discrimination based on their gender, which reduces their impact in society as well as reduces their agency, access and ability

to make empowered choices. This is recognised by the United Nations and specifically, their Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5: the achievement of gender equality and empowerment for all women and girls (UNWomen, n.d.). This goal targets several hindering factors currently facing women and girls to achieve the equal level of participation and agency in society compared to men. Therefore, unlocking this potential is critical for small island developing states such as Trinidad & Tobago to diversify their tourism product and reduce reliance on their hydrocarbon reserves to boost their economic resilience.

This study was motivated by my broader interest in the social aspect of sustainable tourism development, especially within the Caribbean where tourism is a motor of economic activity. From my previous professional experience as a sustainable tourism research assistant at a regional development agency, I worked primarily on high-level tourism policy development and observed the impact of women in regional tourism development from grassroots to government level.

This experience encouraged me to focus further on how women's experiences shape and drive grassroots initiatives within my own country, and how their empowerment can be leveraged for true sustainable development. The village of Paramin was selected to be the backdrop of this study for its rich cultural heritage and the preservation of same, where tourism exists in a symbiotic relationship with its community and the women who are the foundation of it. An assessment of the level of empowerment of women in their CBT initiatives in rural Paramin is an important step in achieving this goal, as a key tenet of sustainable tourism development is encouraging their agency and independence to then be leveraged to generate real, tangible benefits firstly for the community in which they live and beyond.

As women outnumber men in the regional tourism industry, they are the lifeblood of the industry and must be given a space for their experiences to be heard and valued when usually the status quo renders them invisible. This study will be a means by which their experiences will be ventilated and their empowerment highlighted in order to demonstrate how sustainable tourism is the key to tourism diversification in the country of Trinidad & Tobago, it is critical now more than ever to transform the current reality of a heavily seasonal, undynamic tourism product into a flexible and varied one that truly spreads all the benefits to all who participate.

Aim and Objectives:

As questions surrounding resilience for the regional tourism industry continue to be posed, it is worthwhile to investigate the extent to which empowerment is felt through women-led CBT businesses in rural Paramin.

The concepts of empowerment and community-based tourism will be discussed in detail to provide a theoretical framework on which the study will be based, where the goal is to

understand the phenomena before applying it to a real-world context. Another objective of this study is to highlight the ways in which this empowerment has been hindered or encouraged by the national tourism ecosystem in Trinidad & Tobago.

In this thesis, the focus will seek to also highlight the extent to which women's involvement in their own CBT activities contribute to their perceived level of empowerment – questions will be posed about the benefits, challenges and overall feeling of well-being felt by the women through their community-based tourism businesses. It will also focus on:

- how women-led businesses contribute to social cohesion and their personal social empowerment;
- documenting the experiences of rural women in CBT activities.

The research questions thus, were:

RQ1: Can community-based tourism (CBT) help to empower women in the rural village of Paramin?

RQ2: How are the women's social empowerment impacted through their tourism-related activities?

RQ3: Is the wider community experiencing sustainable development through the empowerment of women in Paramin?

Importance of the Research:

The study will contribute to the scarce literature on women in tourism in the Caribbean region in another context, seeking to explore another facet of their importance to the industry. Giving voice to women to describe their own contexts instead of speaking on their behalf is important in order to frame their challenges and offer solutions to same. This will be another way to support their independence and agency, and highlight how a bottom-up approach is critical to giving them more opportunities to shape the tourism landscape in their local community and the wider domestic tourism ecosystem.

Structure of the Research

The first chapter of the study introduces the theoretical framework of the key concept framing this work: empowerment, community-based tourism and how these interact with women in the tourism industry. It considers the myriad of definitions and perceptions of empowerment by several authors and seeks to come to a general consensus on what constitutes social empowerment in particular, and what it would look like for women in tourism. It also discusses the positives and challenges as it relates to community-based tourism and its development in rural areas.

The second chapter of the study contextualises the background of the study. It presents a profile of both the Caribbean region and the country of Trinidad & Tobago and their tourism product, with a focus on the historical, political and cultural background that shapes the face of the contemporary tourism industry. Both of these profiles are critical to understanding the potential challenges and opportunities that impact the focus of this study.

In the third chapter, the methodology of the study is explained, with a brief profile of the village of Paramin which was enriched through online as well as first-hand accounts of tour guides who live and work in the community. The rationale behind the data collection is expounded on, taking into account the challenges and procedures that framed the way the interviews were conducted. As such, it is explained how the semi structured interviews and subsequent transcribing and analysis of the data were executed in order to properly present the experiences of the women.

Next, the fourth chapter is where the rich presentation of the data collected can be found, with excerpts from the interviews conducted with the sample of women found in the village. It is divided into the major tenets of empowerment as set out by the study, examining how the women's experiences align with identified themes and the outcomes stemming from their work in tourism-related activities.

The fifth chapter concludes the study, taking a final look at the question of empowerment and whether or not the research questions were answered. Overall study limitations, and recommendations for future research as well as future application of the findings in this study are also presented.

Chapter One: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the key concepts that will frame the focus of this study. Thus, the concepts of community-based tourism (CBT) will be explained with several examples of how this model has been applied to varying degrees in various destinations. A discussion will be presented on the intersection of gender and tourism and the challenges and opportunities faced by women in the industry. Finally, the concept of social capital and empowerment respectively will be presented, with clear explanations to how its dimensions will be applied to the focus of the study, showing how the theory will be utilised in the framing of the study's hypotheses and the eventual development of the dissertation's methodology.

Community-based Tourism (CBT) and the rural space: concepts and criticisms

Considered as an alternative to traditional mass tourism models, this is described by McCall and Mearns (2021) in their study on South African women in the Western Cape as activities surrounding a local community's cultural and natural heritage in which local communities participate (p. 158). The Trinidad & Tobago national CBT Sub-Policy goes further to emphasise the preservation and protection of such cultural and natural assets all while ensuring local communities can benefit from same. Zielinski et al (2020) describe its defining characteristics as being entirely managed by the local community, while also being independent, family-owned and usually localised in rural areas.

Community-based Tourism emerged in the 1990s as a tool to counteract mass tourism and as a tool for overall sustainable development (Strydom et al, 2018). It first began to be applied in the rural context, looking at "pro-poor" models of tourism that would benefit local communities - as such, it evolved into a social mobilisation tool for local residents (El-Manhaly and Taha, 2024). This model this considers the community as a vital component of the tourism product, which allows them to adapt to external changes when required to maintain the quality and integrity of the product (López-Guzman et al, 2011). The authors Strydom et al, (2018) highlight the key factors that lead to a successful community-based tourism initiative:

- Participatory planning and capacity building-to strengthen community's tourism management skills.
- Collaboration and partnerships facilitating links to markets-to ensure financial viability.
- Local management/empowerment of community members.
- Establishment of environmental/community goals-to ensure outcomes are in alignment with community's values.
- Assistance from enablers (government, funding institutions and private sector)- to facilitate access to the formal economy.
- Focus on generating supplemental income for long-term community sustainability

It must be briefly noted that community-based tourism and rural tourism share a similar characteristic in that they both focus on the authentic experience that is supported by the community in which it is found (Zielinski et al., 2020) and supports the development of the community through a symbiotic relationship between resident and visitor. The UNWTO defines rural tourism as one where the individual's experiences are shaped by their interactions with products based on the area's natural environment and heritage – as such, it is usually set around nature-based activity, such as agriculture, adventure or even simply the desire to witness traditional rural lifestyles and culture (UNWTO, 2021, in Liu et al, 2023).

A study from Ruiz-Ballesteros and Gonzáles-Portillo (2024) describes it as a “fundamentally locally-driven initiative” (p. 1) that begins with resident participation. Tourism that takes place in rural areas can provide economic benefits for the local community. It can contribute to poverty alleviation through participants being fully involved and included within the tourism value chain, where they then use the financial proceeds of their activity to actively improve their quality of life. This type of empowerment is the most important and is the first benefit to be derived. The parallels, both the challenges and positives, between CBT and rural tourism are thus able to be observed, underscoring the importance of this tourism model to villages like Paramin.

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) in 2021, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, visitor preferences have shifted to their desires for more off the beaten track experiences in tourism, where they seek out more remote, less-frequented areas. This presents itself as an opportunity for rural tourism areas to offer a more unique, differentiated experience for visitors, providing a product that can encompass elements such as festivals, nostalgia, snapshots of historical and cultural heritage and of course, relaxation.

However, from a social perspective, there are more things to consider: rural tourism, based on community-led offerings, also provide social resilience. Continuing with the research done by Liu et al (2023), it encourages local populations to focus on the preservation of local crafts and other important elements of domestic culture, as well as an increased focus on the preservation of infrastructure and cultural identity. Furthermore, as it relates to the focus of this study, this kind of tourism enhances visibility, pride and cultural integrity of the community.

Considering the boon that this type of tourism provides for smaller, local populations, it must be questioned the factors impeding this form of tourism from taking root. McCall and Mearns (2021) highlight several factors that are obstacles to CBT, the first being leadership actions that are incompatible with CBT. Tourism models, especially in the Caribbean region, are usually governed by a top-down approach by the central government, and as such, is the antithesis of what the CBT model stands for, where the local community is placed at the centre of driving sustainable actions. This top-down approach generally tends to keep local communities from

driving the decision-making with regard to developing tourism policy that will eventually impact their quality of life within their community. A most recent issue that comes to mind has been the pushback from local communities in Tobago over the proposed development of a luxury hotel chain in an eco-sensitive area on the island – while stakeholder consultation continues, the preparations for the hotel development are continuing in its stead (Trinidad & Tobago Newsday, 2025).

The authors McCall and Mearns in their 2021 study also highlight the inability of the community itself to meaningfully participate in CBT due to personal challenges, such as financial or time constraints incompatible with their day to day lives. This point further stresses the fact that local populations in developing countries can face more challenges linked to their full and meaningful participation in the tourism value chain, such as exclusion in strategic planning, inability to scale community projects, lack of capacity, and feelings of insecurity – all contributing to therefore, a meaningful absence of the benefits from tourism industry activity. They suggest that due to the individual challenges faced by the members of a community who are tasked with driving a tourism product to visitors, their empowerment must be examined on a case-by-case basis.

It must be also noted that conversely, rural tourism and CBT initiatives can tend to be characterized also by lack of access to labour markets and financial products needed for scaling businesses, low levels of human capital and a reliance on traditional industries. (Zielinski et al., 2020). To further illustrate the negative side of community-based tourism, it can actually negatively impact the community and the residents – this can come in the form of the impact on their local environments due to issues like pollution and impacts on their local habitat. For example, in a 2021 study done by Baker and Unni, a particular case of ecotourism in two villages in Saint Kitts was highlighted where the residents stated that the local ecotourism activities developed actually negatively impacted the environment. As CBT mainly relies on the natural heritage of an area, this is particularly important for those using CBT models in their area.

Other negative points are that CBT can actually cause community tensions, from residents having different viewpoints on how projects should be developed, or even disgruntlement as an outcome of CBT activities placing stress on their quality of life. (El-Manhaly and Taha, 2024). Indeed, the friction between “outsiders” and the local community could degrade the quality of life for the locals and can also degrade the destination and tourism product – a characteristic of the Doxey Irridex Model (Wang et al, 2006).

However, it must be understood that community-based tourism can still act as a powerful catalyst to topple the current status quo and place the power in the hands of the local population and community if developed and maintained appropriately. This power is crucial in terms of

really making CBT models participatory and not just “relational”, as discussed by the author Salazar (2012):

many CBT programs are “relational” rather than participatory; “they seek to improve relationships between the community and either the state or the private enterprise through trade-offs rather than to devolve ownership and management of the protected area or tourism project to the local community (p. 12).

The author also spoke about what power would mean in a tourism development context for residents who should be at the core of CBT initiatives:

Power is people’s ability to control the resources required for tourism development – labor, capital, culture and natural resources – and to secure personal returns from having tourism in their community. (p. 12)

Furthermore, community-based tourism can resolve the issue of environmental damage, all while supporting small-scale, local community development and the preservation of culture without exploitation (Bagus et al., 2019). It touches on all three axes of sustainability and is a powerful tool in the hands of local communities, who should be the major beneficiary of tourism. While the region’s tourism product undoubtedly rests on the ‘sea, sun and sand’ model and its rich marine resources, CBT has emerged as an alternative to the traditional mass tourism model, which has long left local communities reeling with the aftereffects of unchecked tourism activity. Indeed, community-based tourism is touted as one of the major keys towards sustainable tourism development. However, it has been noted that the actions needed to support this type of tourism does not have the longevity it requires, especially from a financial viewpoint. A study from Zielinski et al (2020) noted that most Community-Based Tourism projects tend to fail after the economic support wanes and falls away, and as such, very few CBT projects continue to exist in the medium to long term.

A 2010 UNTourism report also mentions that CBT has a specific gender lens through which its activity unfolds, and that careful intent must happen to allow for the initiatives to truly empower women. Placing the decision-making power in the hands of women as it relates to tourism activity and development allows for transformation of traditional roles, increased economic prosperity, and greater social cohesion (Vujko et al., 2024). This implies a focus on not just an increase in participation but in the “quality” of participation, due to the extra mental load faced by women undertaking household and caregiving labour (UNTourism, 2010).

Successful development of CBT projects can only imply strong inclusion and participation of local communities, where increased social capital and social empowerment in turn power the continued growth of the tourism industry. It can also be particularly impactful for rural

communities and their development. Marginalised groups already found within rural contexts can stand to benefit from CBT projects, where the indigenous, the youth and specifically women can propel development.

A study on CBT in the village of Mae Kampong in Thailand from authors Jitpakdee et al (2016) showed that there was a cooperative system developed by the village residents with the support of the government, providing technical and infrastructural support. This system then in turn allowed for the residents to participate fully in the CBT activities and saw them experience the development of their village, particularly through an established village fund that was created to share profits equitably. Certain outcomes of this initiative were increased capacity for the village residents, better social welfare and infrastructure and better economic outcomes for the people who were involved in the tourism activity.

A case study of the Quilombo community in Paraty, Rio de Janeiro state was conducted by Lusby and Pinheiro (2019), where a CBT initiative was implemented. Through this, it was stressed that the governance of the CBT project, encompassing the community's culture and heritage, was successful to the involvement of the residents. The community also had a big input on how the programme was to be structured, as well as the frequency with which they received visitors, despite it being in a remote area of Rio de Janeiro.

Irandu and Shah's 2014 paper on the intersection of community involvement, women's empowerment and sustainable development in Kenya's ecotourism landscape is an analysis of CBT and its relationship with community and women. The authors look at the current realities in rural Kenya and the importance of developing alternative income-generating activity, ie. community-based tourism based on environmental assets. Furthermore, ecotourism and its potential was earmarked as one of the key factors to propel this diversification of the tourism industry, as well as transformation of rural women's livelihoods. Key benefits such as poverty reduction, and overall social welfare were highlighted as the major benefits. Gender issues within ecotourism, and by wider perspective, tourism itself has been a longstanding issue that however hasn't been adequately studied. However, the author affirms that women, much like other marginalized groups in society, should be properly supported through several initiatives, one of which being a participatory planning approach.

The link between gender and ecotourism was highlighted as being a positive for sustainable resource management, upskilling of the wider community, and the fulfilment of the Millenium Development Goals (now Sustainable Development Goals). Gender equity, sustainability and its benefits based on greater women inclusion were discussed, which has a multiplier effect throughout the community. However, challenges such as traditional perspectives on employment for women, as well as access and control were pointed out, showing that there is

still work to be done. Finally, the authors recommended the expansion of the ecotourism sector with a careful consideration for greater inclusion of women, noting the potential of women to be real catalysts of economic and overall sustainable growth with the right support and frameworks.

With the potential of CBT amounting to 575.9 billion USD in 2022 globally (Allied Market Research, 2024), it can be one of the ways developing countries tackle their development agenda through tourism. As global trends continue to point towards tourists' heightened desires for sustainable activities and low impact yet memorable experiences, sustainable tourism frameworks have stepped in to provide answers to visitor demands – with Community-Based Tourism as one of the leading solutions.

Gender, Women and Tourism

Gender issues in tourism, especially as it relates to women in the Caribbean tourism industry, is not a realm that is widely analysed – the bulk of the existing literature focuses on sex tourism (Hope et al, 2020). This dearth in the literature should be addressed from a holistic perspective, especially since women comprise 49% of tourism industry's employment globally (ibid, 2020). In order to achieve this, the agenda towards the empowerment of women can begin through the implementation of sustainable tourism and its related activities.

Indeed, women have a major presence in the global tourism industry and their role in tourism value chains, providing service in different industry subsectors. They play a key role in sustainable tourism actions, and their undeniable impact is felt at the economic, social and even environmental levels, where they are empowered through their part in tourism-related activities.

Women leading the charge in tourism activity within their sphere of influence, especially in rural communities, engender a ripple effect that can be felt beyond their immediate circles. Women particularly contribute to rural tourism development through niche areas like agritourism, handicrafts and gastronomic tourism (Dong & Khan, 2023), contributing to a diverse tourism product that can slow down the exodus of youth to urbanised areas. Having women empowered through the lens of tourism can also see them on a personal level having more economic agency to care for their households, increased self-esteem, and a ripple effect throughout their wider communities. Communities can become closer and more enmeshed as women play a more active role within its micro-society – more opportunities for entrepreneurial travails, more upskilled individuals, and a greater handle on the future of upcoming generations (World Bank, 2021).

Despite this, there still exists a clear divide between men and women as it relates to the tourism industry. Firstly, women are less likely to receive promotions within the formal tourism industry structure in comparison to men, where they are segregated into divisions that keep them at a certain level despite having similar education backgrounds as men. Hutchings et al (2020)

describe this as a “sticky floor” for women, while men are catapulted to the top in what is described as a “glass elevator”. As a consequence, they also tend to be underrepresented at higher C-suite or managerial levels of the industry, and on average earn almost 15% less (Voumik et al., 2022). This is seen in both developed and developing countries, as women tend to be seen as ‘cheaper’ tourism labour in comparison to men despite higher levels of education compared to their male counterparts.

When examining the reasons behind the lack of visibility of women in tourism, the socialisation of women plays a big part in this: regarded as caretakers, they occupy a double role as they seize more job opportunities in the labour market while running their household and taking care of family. A study done by Sastre-Castillo et al. (2015) supports this link as it relates to entrepreneurship, highlighting that women even gravitate towards more social projects compared to men, and this could be as a result of women’s socialisation as caretakers.

To expand on the viewpoint of Sastre Castillo et al, it must be noted that women tend to frequent more community-based initiatives due to the industry’s flexibility, high seasonality and informality – as women, their stereotypical gender roles require them to carry a double responsibility caring for both their households while working to contribute financially (Ramchurjee, 2011). However, despite this double challenge, the entrepreneurial route is harnessed by women in tourism, especially in developing economies. In the region of Latin America and the Caribbean, women account for between 13 to 23% of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (Inter-American Development Bank, 2022; Awai, n.d.). Yet, they still continue to face socioeconomic obstacles to scaling their businesses, such as limited access to financial products to scale their small businesses, overall economic resilience as well as the specific challenge of caregiver responsibilities, especially in rural communities (Banzon et al., 2025).

Further to this, women are seen in roles that are service-based in nature, such as cooking, cleaning and other hospitality services like front of office at hotels. Women in the tourism industry also are more prone to unsafe working conditions, violence, exploitation and even sexual harassment (Hutchings et al., 2020). Their positioning in the tourism industry is then compounded by the idealised imagery pushed by destinations. Women are framed as objects of desire and consumption in marketing for foreign visitors, which reinforces dangerous gendered stereotypes of being constantly in service (Cave and Kilic, 2010).

When looking at this perspective as it relates to self-employed women, they tend to exercise a greater level of self-efficiency and empowerment in their tourism related businesses. They develop a strong connection to the area in which their business activity is found, and this helps in turn to contribute to the area’s development. This also allows for them to balance the existing expectations of them caring for family and gives them more space to develop their social

relationships. Al Mazroei's work on women's tourism businesses and how it lends to their resistance in Muslim societies, cited in Hutchings et al (2020), highlights the potential for changing attitudes towards women in this field of work and how they can be "agents of change".

In order to ensure the welfare of vulnerable groups such as women, a destination must address these longstanding perceptions of the true contribution of a woman to tourism. Gender-specific and discrimination-reducing policy actions as well as shifts in mindsets should be encouraged to break the status quo. For the tourism sector, this would look like more women occupying management and other critical decision-making spaces. The breaking of stereotypes in order to break the "glass ceiling" (Cave and Kilic, 2010) is critical to enable the empowerment of women within the industry. Addressing this will allow destinations to fully unlock the potential of the tourism industry (Ramchurjee, 2011).

The concept of perception

This must be also understood in order to achieve the overall purpose of the study. As such, perception is a way of understanding reality through the human senses, and mediated through "figure, form, language, behaviour, and action" (Munhall, 2008, p. 605). McDonald (2011) goes onto define this term as an "uniquely individualised experience" (p. 5). In her work, she summarised further what the noun also encompassed, which is the "ability to understand inner qualities or relationships" (ibid) and "the knowledge gained from the process of coming to know or understand something" (ibid).

At a social level, perception is a mediator for how one perceives the world through the social context in which they are found. Therefore, factors such as gender and socioeconomic status can influence perception. Once again, according to the work of McDonald, certain criteria must be satisfied in order for this process to happen: sensory awareness of the experience, the individual's own experience, and understanding of the both in order to garner an appropriate response.

Empowerment

Empowerment as a concept is multifaceted and comprises several elements that contribute to the self-actualisation of an individual. Rowlands (1997) described empowerment as an all-encompassing process and an ongoing action that an individual undergoes. Using a feminist perspective applied to empowerment, the author states that empowerment should include the dismantlement of stereotypes, preconceived notions and other negative viewpoints to allow people to act in their full independent capacity and influence decisions. This perspective is also delineated into three dimensions - personal, relational and collective:

“(i) Personal: where empowerment is about developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity and undoing the effects of internalised oppression.

(ii) Relational: where empowerment is about developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of the relationship and decisions made within it.

(iii) Collective: where individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone. This includes involvement in political structures but might also cover collective action based on cooperation rather than competition” (Rowlands, 1997, p.15, as referenced in Green, 2022).

Building on this, all three dimensions involve a strong level of agency, which first comes from within, that is, self-confidence, and then spreads outward to others. This is closely linked to the aforementioned study on perception, where the process starts at the cognitive level and can be affected or impacted by several internal or external factors. In supporting this comparison, the work from Rowland (1997) also points to the need for elements like “self-respect [...] capacity-building, leadership development and active strengthening of networks” (p. 22).

Empowerment theory, as it is noted by Bagheri et al in their 2022 study, is two-fold: on a personal level, it fosters critical awareness, a feeling of control and participation, while at the community level there is an increase in diversity, improved quality of life as well as economic and social justice. Another study from Irandu and Shah (2014) says that the addressing of power imbalances and increased autonomy is critical when it comes to women’s empowerment. They also affirm from their study that the building blocks of this empowerment rests on “knowledge, confidence, power, skills, and access to knowledge” (p. 250).

The element of agency is found in another author’s examination of the concept – Stroma Cole’s 2018 work on empowerment describes empowerment as an active process that builds on three ‘A’s: agency (making things happen), autonomy (decision-making and self-governance), and authority (respect from others) (pg.3). We can observe a chain reaction when this empowerment actively begins to occur – the authors McCall and Mearns (2021) state that empowerment through tourism activity begins at the household when the woman begins earning more money. This then increases her independence, which then in turn supports their social relationships,

which strengthens community bonds – this is similar to the sentiments of Rowland’s work that frames empowerment as an action, an active process.

Empowerment applied through the lens of tourism, as worded by the authors Bynum Boley et al (2015), is described foremost as “agency” and agrees with the work of Cole (2018) accorded to residents of communities:

removing any structural barriers that would prohibit the community from having control over development (political empowerment), enabling the community to capture the economic benefits of tourism (economic empowerment), fostering community cohesion through the tourism development process (social empowerment), and with a final tourism product that the residents are proud of sharing with visitors (psychological empowerment) and that sustains the community's unique natural and cultural resources (environmental empowerment). (p.114)

They also relied on the description from researcher Scheyvens (1999) and their four dimensions of empowerment:

whether the local community derives financial or monetary benefits [...] (economic empowerment); has control over a[...] venture (political empowerment); if it provides opportunities for people to develop new skills, gain respect within their communities and thus improves their self-esteem (psychological empowerment); and if it enhances community cohesion (social empowerment) (p. 252).

In a more recent paper by Scheyvens and van der Watt (2021), empowerment is broadly depicted as “transformative”, where unjust structures and disadvantaged conditions are uprooted definitively:

Empowerment is understood as the activation of the confidence and capabilities of previously disadvantaged or disenfranchised individuals or groups so that they can exert greater control over their lives, challenge unequal power relations, mobilize resources to meet their needs, and work to achieve social justice (p. 3).

The feminist literature on empowerment recognises gender equity of course as the core of this element. The ability for women to make choices surrounding their psychological, economic and

social agency must be present in order for any change in their empowerment or disempowerment to happen. Kabeer (1999) notes that other concepts feed into the feminist definition of empowerment. This is split into external manifestations: “power, capability, rights, interests, choices, control” (p. 11) and internal qualities: “voices, public presence, internal strength and confidence, [...] reflection and analytical skills” (p. 11). The author also affirms that the process of being empowered begins in the home as this transformation is the final hurdle where men switch roles or give up some of their privileges for a woman’s empowerment to happen. Also, the resources required to be empowered, both internal and external, are closely interrelated and affect each other as explained by the author:

“Different aspects of women’s disempowerment, and hence empowerment, are closely related so that initiatives in relation to one aspect are likely to set off changes in other aspects, although not in easily predictable ways. Changes at the level of resources may translate into changes in the sense of self-worth; a space for critical reflection may be the first step to building greater political participation; a campaign to close the gender gap in education at the state level may affect intrahousehold negotiations on these questions.”
(p. 14)

Building on the theory, some researchers have sought to apply them to practical contexts. A study done by Al Mazroei (2017) looked at the empowerment of women who were involved in tourism activity in Oman. She examined how the experiences of these Omani women running their tourism businesses affected their level of empowerment. From this study which she conducted through mixed-methods approaches, she was able to observe several challenges, benefits and opportunities that the women encountered. The level of empowerment and their outcomes were applied against the work of Rowlands, using agency and autonomy amongst other defining outcomes for the women’s personal holistic development. Her study defined as she states it, ‘a unique and pioneer’ (p. 378) group of women highlighted through the lens of an emerging tourism industry in the country. Her study however, highlighted the woes that are still faced by them despite this novel emergence, such as imbedded gender ideologies, and she has provided recommendations on counteracting such with the necessary stakeholders critical to holistic tourism planning.

Another study done by Turner (2018) examines empowerment for women in community-based tourism through economic, social, psychological and a political lens, where each element was measured against their level of efficacy in contributing to the women’s empowerment. The psychological elements of empowerment point towards the self-esteem and overall relationship with the individual, where pride, appreciation and reward are major factors. The political angle

was examined through community representation and decision-making, as well as the interrelation with economic empowerment. Simply put, as the first level of empowerment, that is, economic, is achieved, social and political empowerment ensues. The external perception of women is important especially when it comes to community participation, as they are viewed as critical pieces to community activity and associations. Through her study, she illustrated the importance of women owning their own tourism businesses as the key to proper empowerment, and furthermore, sustainable tourism development. Having more women participate within the tourism value chain will have a positive ripple effect, based on the literature consulted for this study – the proceeds span further beyond an economic standpoint to a psychosocial and even environmental benefit for wider society. Focusing specifically on social empowerment, she divided this element into separate areas, those being: human capital development, social cohesion (or lack thereof) and formation of associations. These areas were identified as indicators for the presence of empowerment in a social context, and were used in her study to measure the level of same.

McCall and Mearns (2021) state from their study that in order for models such as CBT to flourish, the empowerment of the community through women is necessary. The potential of creating enabling environments for the empowerment of women in the tourism industry is one that should be leveraged in order for true sustainable tourism development to take root and grow. Indeed, the focus on promoting sustainable tourism actions is now more important than ever, especially as new data demonstrates that currently only 15% of tourism-related Sustainable Development Goals could be achieved by 2030 (WTM Hub, 2024). With this in mind, fostering greater inclusion and involvement for local communities in the tourism value chain is one of the logical steps towards achieving those goals, with women being a core part of this push – their contributions go beyond the extra economic contribution to impacting social and even environmental frontiers.

To go further into the dimensions of empowerment, Movono and Dahles (2017) posit that often empowerment can be conflated with participation – however, the former transcends simple participation where the individual or group not only is included but has actual control. The study also supports Irandu and Shah's analysis that women's groups (or female empowerment platforms) are effective in transmitting and promoting actual empowerment and collective work, leading to an increase in opportunities, improved community welfare, and economic and social empowerment. Therefore, true empowerment for women in tourism points towards both collective participation and ownership of initiatives and projects, acquiring skills, financial resources and experiencing self-actualisation through increased self-esteem. This empowerment, especially when applied to the context of women-led tourism initiatives is crucial for sustainable tourism development and positive community development. In this vein, the study will seek to examine the following hypothesis:

H₁: Women's empowerment positively influences community development and quality of life.

Social Capital

A particularly important concept that should be examined is one of social capital, where the importance of social connections, networks and associations. This can be linked to holistic community development and overall quality of life improvements, where social capital becomes valuable currency especially in rural or village contexts.

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu describes capital as an accumulation of labour over time that has the potential to create profit for the individual – building on this inherently economic concept, it also has the potential to be transformed into social and or cultural capital (Richardson, 1986). With this being said, social capital is then the possession of “a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (p.21). Bourdieu, as quoted in the study of Richardson goes further to liken this to a transaction in which the amount of social capital that one has is directly correlated to the network the individual cultivates. The network that an individual has is as a result of their own work to create either other individual relationships or collective relationships that can be called upon at a later date.

In another paper, this time from Siisiäinen (2000), they examine Robert D. Putnam's view on social capital, where he dissects the concept into three parts – comprising of “moral obligations and norms, social values (especially trust) and social networks (especially voluntary associations)” (p. 2). It is the foundation of ‘communal vitality’ (p.3) and can counteract social decline within a given group, community or association. This is a little dissimilar to Bourdieu's viewpoint, where the core components of social capital are only group membership and social networks. These two elements work together to raise the profile of the individual in a social context, where they are known for something in a specific societal area or field.

Ramon-Hidalgo and Morris (2018) spoke in their study on the intersection of social capital and political empowerment that social capital is an ‘investment’, an intentional approach to making social connections that both value mobilisation of resources such as influence and information, and most importantly, returns this value to the individual and the community. It can be argued thus that empowerment is be linked to the social capital accrued by the individual, as explained through Bourdieu's work that group memberships have a positive multiplier effect on other types of capital that exist. So indeed, capital can be political, social or economic. But as Ramon-Hidalgo and Ramon state, social capital can be either structural or cognitive: the former refers to connections and networks within a society, while the latter refers to the psychological element that mediates values that govern interpersonal relationships, such as trust and reciprocity.

Social capital can be argued to be one of the major building blocks to community-based tourism initiatives and is one of the most important outcomes to be seen from the empowerment of women in tourism activities. Traditionally, women face a double burden of being responsible for both their professional and domestic responsibilities, and this can impede the creation of strong social networks. This social capital can support the growth of collective actions, strengthen both personal and community networks, and improve overall welfare and stability (Pramanik et al, 2019). In fact, Chi Thai (2017, p. 6) states that it “facilitates collective agreements and mobilises scarce assets to raise local people’s voices” and is contingent on the level of community participation. Further to this, the strengthening of social networks through the increase in social capital encourages a “sustained expansion” of the local tourism ecosystem, through a favourable ecosystem for greater quality and quality of skills, creativity and business acumen amongst women (Dong and Khan, 2023). It is evident that this is a critical counterbalance to the challenges facing women empowerment and successful CBT development. Therefore, the first hypothesis of this study is as follows:

H₂: An increase in women’s social capital positively influences community development

Another study that focuses on this concept describes social capital as a collection of “actual or potential resources available because of networking, good relationships or membership in a group” (Pramanik et al., 2019, p. 63). This definition also underpins the concept of a synergistic relationship within the target group that is built on trust, authority, norms and standards and social organisation (ibid). The interactions stemming from these groups can form the building blocks of resilient community ties and marked social empowerment – in a 2020 study by Dolezal and Novelli, this is characterised mainly by “... equilibrium, collaboration, a sense of community, and strong community groups”. This highlights another hypothesis to be tested by this study:

H₃: Women’s social empowerment facilitates positive tourism development in communities

From the Literature Review conducted, the paper will now seek to analyse the perceived nature of empowerment felt by the women in rural Paramin through Turner’s (2018) delineation of social empowerment.

Chapter Two: Contextualisation

Historical Legacy of Colonialism – profile of regional Tourism

Tourism contributed 11.4% GDP to the Caribbean region in 2023, which accounted for close to 85 billion USD; this concretises the industry's importance yet shows a fragility in its economic health (First Citizens Economic Research Unit, 2025). This fragility is spurred on by the region's vulnerability to exogenous shocks – for example, the annual hurricane season within the region routinely has a devastating impact on the islands. To illustrate, in 2024 the islands of Barbados, Grenada and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines suffered devastating damage following the passage of Category Five hurricane Beryl – destroying almost all the infrastructure on Union Island, one of the Grenadines (ReliefWeb, 2024).

Despite these perennial challenges, the region continues to hold onto the tourism industry and the unique destinations found within as the selling point for both domestic and international markets. Even as the tourism industry continues its post-COVID-19 trajectory, the Caribbean region has sustained growth: even with the region's natural disasters, tourist arrivals reached to 34.2 million international visitors, which is a 6.9% increase from pre-pandemic levels (Caribbean Tourism Organisation, 2025). It must be highlighted that this strong interest in the region from international tourists is driven by the diverse tourism offering. Across the Caribbean region, one can see the diversity of the regional tourism offering: several types of tourism products ranging from ecotourism, sport tourism, agritourism, gastronomic and heritage tourism can be found across the region. Tourism industry activity contributes to overall growth and development through the generation of employment opportunities for local communities, and the receipt of foreign exchange from its external visitors.

As mentioned earlier, the regional industry faces challenges that span from natural disasters to lack of institutional capacity: longstanding concerns such as lack of economies of scale, an under-skilled workforce, and high economic leakages persist – all fuelled by the Caribbean region's historical, colonial past. It has been argued that the regional tourism industry has been a hinderance to real economic and sustainable development (Sealy, 2018) despite the global messaging that tourism is a key development tool.

Wong's 2015 study on the link between Caribbean tourism and the ever-persistent vestiges of colonialism argues that the regional tourism industry reflects colonial power structures, where a small foreign minority wields influence and siphons benefits outwards of the region while using low-paid local workforce. He argues that the mass boom in tourism has pushed destination carrying capacity to dangerous levels, which in turn has a ripple effect – particularly on the environmental integrity of islands.

This argument is evident in the areas of accommodation infrastructure that favours visitors and shirks the obligations towards environmental preservation for financial profit. It is also witnessed in labour policy that favours low costs in favour of multinational companies with far more purchasing power than domestic entities – in fact, a large number of tourism businesses regionally are foreign owned, and anywhere from 37% to 90% of tourism expenditure is repatriated to the foreign country where these companies are based (Sealy, 2018).

These economic leakages continue with governments giving duty-free concessions on building materials, and luxury imports and high import bills for even the food served in accommodation – local suppliers are often excluded from the supply chain due to foreign visitors' different food tastes that need to be catered to, low yield and even low-quality crops (ibid, 2018). Also, even the privatisation of land and coastal areas for the exclusion of local communities (Wong, 2015; Sealy, 2018) are routinely seen, such as the example of Jamaica where only 1% of beaches are open to the public according to the Jamaica Beach Birthright Environmental Movement (ClimateTracker.org, 2025).



Figure 1: JABBEEM activists advocating for full public beach access in Jamaica. Source: ClimateTrackerCaribbean.org.

This extractive dynamic, and overdependence on foreign entities, has impacted local communities, who tend to not experience the benefits of tourism in its current state. As a consequence, the social carrying capacity of islands is affected. This concept is defined as the maximum level of tolerance by local communities towards visitors before the destination is degraded and depleted (Ajay and Devasia, 2015).

An argument can be made therefore, for the negative impact of the country's colonial past on the underdevelopment of tourism. Sealy (2015) argues that despite the colonial chains being broken with the independence of Caribbean islands, the longstanding relationships between the ex-colonies and the former metropolises have never been structurally addressed. The tourism industry as it is thus was developed in this same vein and continues to face a difficult environment that has undoubtedly stymied its development: lack of economies of scale, an under-skilled workforce, and high economic leakages persist – all fuelled by the Caribbean region's historical and colonial past.

The region has noticed these challenges and throughout, there are instances of sustainable tourism projects that seek to be a counterbalance to the challenges and pervading similar characteristics to colonialism. For example, the island of Saint Lucia recognised the need for a sustainable model and through their Heritage Tourism Programme which ran between 1998-2005, they sought to take a bottom-up approach. Focusing on local communities engaging with government agencies, they identified measures that would develop CBT initiatives with communities at the core. This saw heritage sites being restored, cultural events and festivals more visible and at the forefront, as well as promoting more sustainable actions throughout the tourism industry, such as protection for marine ecosystems, energy conservation and management of waste. According to a report from Leotaud et al. (2024), the programme had successful outcomes like economic empowerment and revitalisation of culture, but was faced with funding challenges as it was partly funded by the European Commission and the Government of Saint Lucia and was meant to run for a finite period of time (Renard, 2001). While the programme has not restarted, it did provide a good example of how the bottom-up approach can be effective and an alternative to the current tourism status quo in the Caribbean.

Jamaica, while despite their challenges counteracting the extractive nature of tourism, also are a good example of sustainable tourism within the region. An example of this is their established Tourism Enhancement Fund (TEF) which utilises a tourism tax from every visitor to fund projects on the island. While tourism is a large contributor to government revenue in the Caribbean, the proceeds are not specifically reinvested into the industry and as such, tourism projects are usually faced with funding challenges, much like the Saint Lucia example. The reinvestment of this fund, to the tune of \$50 million (Hillsdon, 2025) goes back into developing infrastructure and maintaining the natural heritage of the island, especially as visitors now travel with the intent of seeking out authentic experiences. The community, and community-led actions, thus continues to be at the centre of sustainable actions, with the Jamaican government also establishing the Tourism Linkages Network within the TEF to increase consumption and production of locally produced goods and services for use along the tourism value chain (TEF, n.d.).

Trinidad & Tobago and Tourism

The country is a twin island republic situated off the eastern coast of Venezuela and represent the group of southernmost islands in the English-speaking Caribbean. The island's historical past as a former colony saw its shores pass through several spheres of influence – the island of Trinidad was rediscovered in 1492 by Christopher Columbus for Spain, and through the Cedula of Population in the late 1400s, the island was developed by French Catholic planters. Eventually the island was conquered by the British and remained under their control until their independence in 1962. Tobago's colonial past was separate and apart from Trinidad's, passing several times under the control of the French, Spanish, Dutch and the Courlanders – modern-day Latvia – before it was taken by the British in 1763 and then subsequently annexed to Trinidad in 1889 (Caribbean Atlas, 2013). After witnessing periods in the 20th century of mass immigration from Asia, where large numbers of Indian and Chinese immigrants settled on the island, the country's historical legacy has led to the cosmopolitan melting pot that forms the basis of the country's rich culture.

The tourism landscape in the twin-island republic seems almost similar in characteristics to their other regional counterparts. The country's tourism industry contributed 7.8% of the total GDP and around 53,000 jobs in 2019, while the country's major source markets continued to be the United States and Europe (WTTC, 2021; MTCA, 2021).

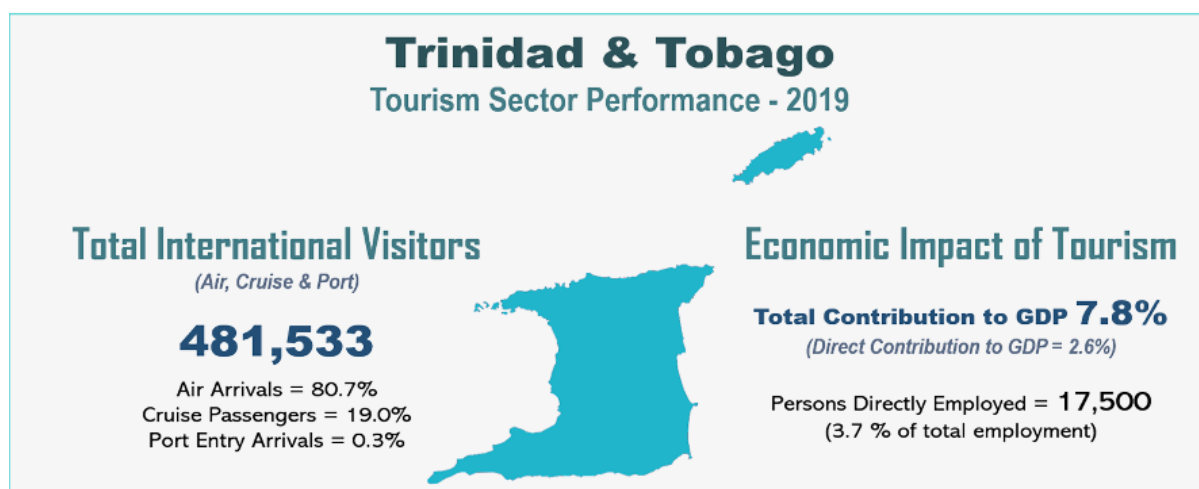


Figure 2: Trinidad & Tobago tourism performance numbers for 2019. Source: Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, Tourism Sub-Policy, 2021

Also, its tourism offering positions it as a unique destination within the Caribbean region, where it has something for any visitor - cultural and festival tourism, MICE tourism, agritourism and of course, ecotourism based on the islands' marine heritage. The country's Carnival for example, is one of the largest in the Caribbean, and contributed around \$668 million to the national purse this year alone (Christopher, 2025). In fact, Trinidad's carnival, usually held the last two days before the celebration of Ash Wednesday, is the jewel in the island's tourism offering. This event

contributes around 400 million Trinidad & Tobago Dollars (TTD) annually – or the equivalent of around 48 million euros. It also provides a surge in short-term tourism activity, where seasonal employment in hospitality, transport, entertainment, food and beverage and short-term accommodation occurs for both formal and informal sectors (Ganesh, 2025). In the past three years, Tobago has sought to create their own Carnival proceedings in October as a means to capitalise on Trinidad’s success and generate their own revenue, however, both islands benefit massively from the influx of visitors for these two days. As such, Trinidad’s tourism product is heavily based on festival and cultural tourism.

However, while the tourism industry gives important contributions to the national economy, there is a paradox - the country is still less reliant on tourism in comparison to other Caribbean islands due to their large oil and gas reserves that have mainly propelled its development and contributes around 40% of GDP (MTCA, 2021; The Commonwealth, 2015). But, as oil and gas continue to be impacted by external shocks due to geopolitical conflicts, there have been longstanding calls for greater focus to be placed on developing other sustainable models of tourism to reduce seasonality and provide greater opportunities for the industry’s benefits to trickle down.

With this being said, it must be noted that the two islands’ tourism offerings, much like their historical legacies, vary differently. According to the national government’s Tourism Policy, the island of Trinidad aims to reduce the seasonality that is characteristic of the regional tourism industry. This has led to an interesting division in how the national government markets each island: Trinidad is marketed as a 24/7, around the clock destination that boasts festival and cultural tourism offerings due to its annual Carnival, while Tobago as the smaller of the two islands is marketed as an eco-tourism haven (MTCA, 2021). These high and low seasons are impacted heavily by the country’s major source markets, and so the winter season in temperate regions such as North America become the country’s busiest period.

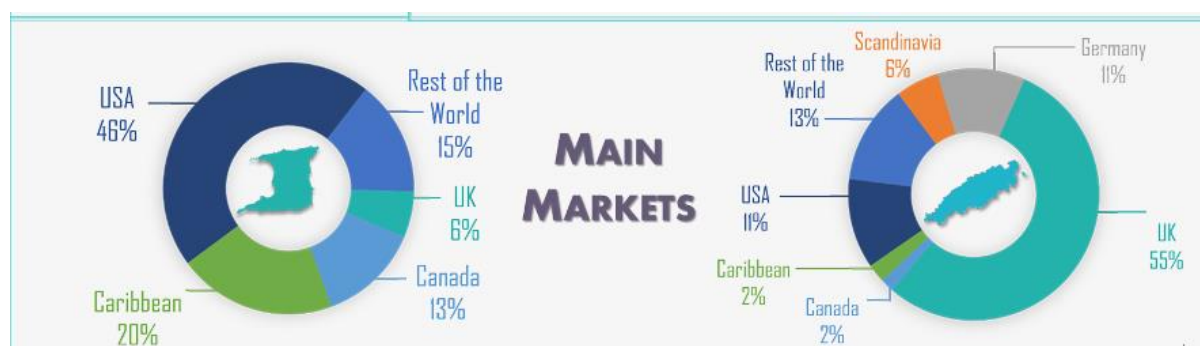


Figure 3: Trinidad & Tobago major source markets. Source: Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, Tourism Sub-Policy, 2021

Government policy now seeks to focus more on generating year-round activities to boost benefits as noted previously. The island of Trinidad also has an established and profitable

Business Tourism and MICE sector (Oxford Business Group, n.d) – since the discovery of major hydrocarbon reserves in the 1950s, the island has long attracted the attention of foreign business visitors for energy issues, and major conferences around energy and shipping.

However, the overall structure of the national tourism industry, much like the region's, is constructed around foreign dependency: there is a monopolisation of market share by foreign entities. The industry is largely foreign-owned and has a large food import bill, which fuels the longstanding obstacles to tourism growth and overall regional development. In fact, a 2024 joint study by Bertrand and Hamilton stated that the underdevelopment of domestic linkages and weak domestic ownership effectively stifle the benefits that local communities could enjoy, leading to continued negligible improvements in local conditions.

Parallel to this is the weak enabling environment created by the government – criticism levied towards government bodies first highlighted a negligible amount of consultation with local communities on tourism products that directly affect them or could potentially bring them benefits. Local tourism projects tend to be put under the control of larger domestic companies which in turn reduces the amount of opportunity for local residents to participate in a part of tourism value chain.

Another issue is visibility of the wider tourism product marketed abroad – because Carnival is the major selling point for the destination, other viable tourism segments tend to be minimised in terms of visibility. One of the tour guides spoken to for this study lamented the lack of marketing surrounding gastronomic and agricultural tourism from the government tourism bodies, which can help residents in rural areas enter the value chain and provide an alternative form of tourism to reduce overdependence on Carnival and reduce seasonality. Another issue raised during personal conversations with the tour guides consulted for this study was the lack of support once a tourism product or project is launched – infrequent upkeep of infrastructure, which leaves tourism sites in a state of dereliction, as well as a lack of monitoring and evaluation of projects, which impacts their longevity.

As it relates to the country's relationship to community-based tourism, the national government's CBT Sub-Policy sets out a plan to further the development of the niche sector within the country (MTCA, 2023). One of the major highlights of the policy was the delineation of the concepts that served as inputs into the conceptualisation of the document itself, namely the focus on:

- Community involvement or participation
- Education and capacity building;
- Co-management;
- Sustainability;
- Equity

- Empowerment

This aligns with the literature consulted for this study on the definitions of community-based tourism and the foundations of a successful project. There was a specific focus on women and supporting their empowerment through CBT by means of increased stakeholder participation as well as capacity-building initiatives. Further to this, a Clustering approach has been applied to CBT development, which supports strong value chains and resilience and provides quality services and products designed by local communities for visitors (MTCA, 2023). Throughout both islands, there are several existing CBT programmes that focus on areas such as ecological preservation, fisheries, recycling, and farming and agriculture (ibid). This has not come without its domestic challenges. The 2023 Sub-Policy further highlights common issues like poor infrastructure hindering access to communities, lack of collaboration with tour operators and other stakeholders, low community interest in CBT, weak private sector involvement and regulatory frameworks to name a few. The most prominent solution as identified in the policy is the “full and meaningful participation by locals in planning and developing tourism” (ibid, p. 23).

Trinidad & Tobago has been developing community-based tourism products throughout the country, which are well-known domestically. As such, examples of successful CBT projects throughout the country were included in the Sub-Policy as positive stories of this tourism model’s implementation and its impact on the national tourism landscape, and they have been included in the following pages.

1. Lopinot Village, Trinidad



Figure 4: Lopinot Historical Complex, one of the cultural sites of Lopinot village. Source: National Trust of Trinidad & Tobago

A village similar in cultural heritage to that of Paramin, they are known for their historical ties to cocoa production. The Lopinot Tourism Association is one of the foremost organisations that has shaped the village's agritourism experience – the offering is shaped around the World Cocoa Trail and its derived activities, such the annual market that sells chocolate, cocoa wine and jam made from local plants. Another major boon for the Lopinot Tourism Association is the Lopinot Chocolate Company, founded in the village and is a part of tours for visitors that in turn support community livelihoods. The Association also plays a part in the promotion of the village's cultural heritage, organising and executing festivals such as the Cocoa Panyol Festival and maintaining the historical heritage found in sites like the Lopinot Caves.

2. Castara Village, Tobago



Figure 5: Castara Bay. Source: Seattle's Travels

The village's CBT product is managed through the Castara Tourism Development Association, which focuses on leveraging tourism for environmental preservation. An emphasis thus is primarily seen through their continuous efforts to maintain the environmental integrity of the coastal village. Both residents and visitors alike are involved in this effort, which returns benefits to both parties. There are also fishing activities, as well as other small-scale farming initiatives to provide the residents with economic opportunities and to provide forwards linkages for the community's food and beverage sector. A highlight of this CBT product is the unique experience of food preparation in traditional ovens – an activity run by the local residents of the village.

3. Matura Village, Trinidad



Figure 6: Photo of entrance to Matura's nesting site for sea turtles. Source: Canadian Sea Turtle Network (CSTN)

The tour company Nature Seekers has operated in this area that is known to be one of the nesting areas for the leatherback turtle. Since its inception it has provided back to the community employment opportunities, and a voice to give input on decisions that shape the realities of the community of Matura. In this village, ecotourism products are on offer – from kayaking to nature walks and turtle watching during the season. Also, the community runs a recycling programme for glass which is repurposed for sale to visitors. Despite its location on the northeastern Atlantic coast, the village also offers MICE tourism activities for business.

Area of Study

The rural village of Paramin, Trinidad & Tobago has risen in profile over recent years as a prime tourism area as part of the country's tourism offering, boasting of a rich community-based tourism product that continues to grow in popularity with foreign visitors. This remote, mountainous area of Northern Trinidad has emerged also as a well-known domestic tourism destination within the country.



Photo of Paramin mountains taken by researcher, August 2025

It is a microcosm of the country's overall cultural and historical heritage, the name of the village stemming from the island's French heritage – the Cedula of Population in 1783 allowed French-speaking settlers from neighbouring territories to come cultivate land under Spanish colonial rule. At the end of colonial rule and looking to contemporary times, it is one of the last remaining

vestiges of French Creole language on the islands, due to the French-speaking settlers from neighbouring French colonies in the 18th century. The village started off after formerly enslaved peoples were given lands in the hilly terrain to cultivate their crops after slavery, and the strong legacy of both Spanish and French heritage has made the area what it is today. In fact, this mix of heritage allowed for the rich culture of the village to take root and be the jewel of the community tourism product.

It also is a part of the breadbasket of the country, having a strong contribution to agriculture due to the village's fertile soil and cultivation of crops such as chive and tomatoes. As the rural village sees its profile continue to rise due to the development of an attractive tourism product, their tourism activity has been propelled by the women of the village. The village is located in Region 1 of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts' Regional Approach to Tourism Development rationale, found in their National Tourism Policy drafted in 2021:

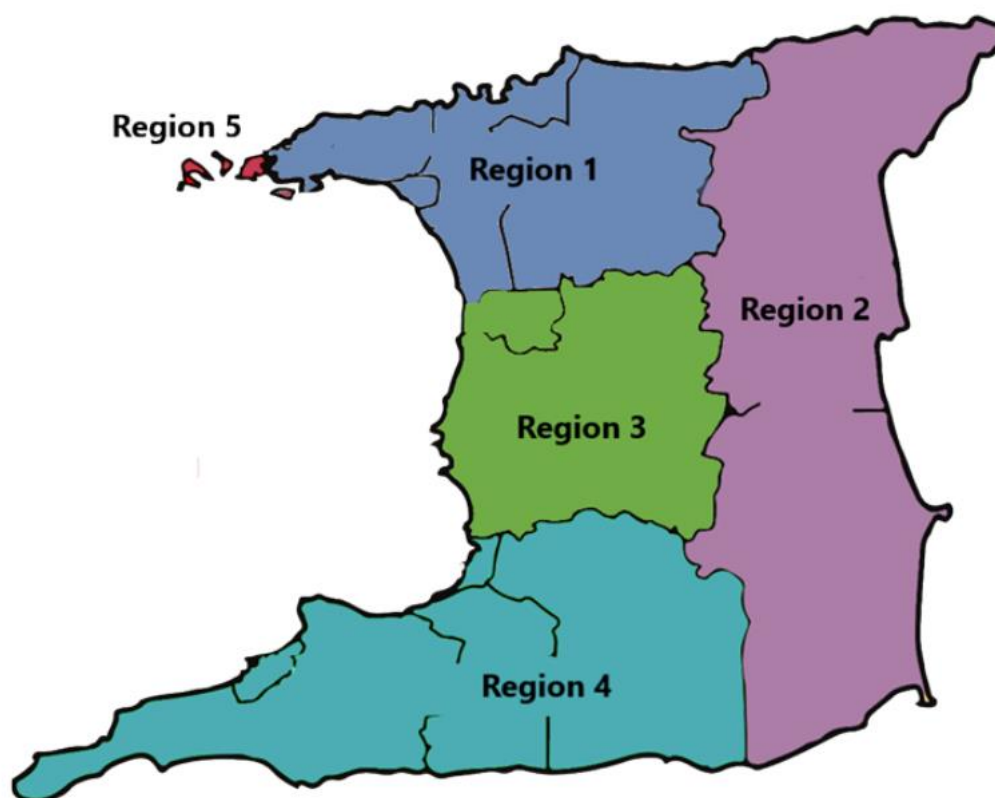


Figure 7: Major tourism regions denoted by the Trinidad & Tobago national tourism ministry. Source: Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, National Tourism Policy, 2021

In this region where the capital of Port of Spain is situated, it is known for several niche tourism products, such as ecotourism and agritourism in rural areas and cultural and heritage tourism and festival tourism in the urban areas immediately surrounding the capital city.

The village has popular cultural events that are well-attended and huge events on the national festival calendar, such as the annual Parang festivities in December. Parang is a traditional form

of music created in Trinidad & Tobago based off the country's Spanish heritage – the Christmas carols are sung in Spanish and were brought from the mainland of South America from Venezuelan immigrants – Cocoa Panyols – who settled in the area to cultivate cocoa in the 19th century.

The rural village has developed their own community ecosystem to lend support to their local population, and create closer bonds and trust. A community ecosystem is critical to bolster resilience for the residents, especially from an economic and social standpoint. Having strong interrelated networks in the village allows residents to support each other and in turn receive support, such as residents supporting each other's business activities and even creating social groups upon which they can rely on.

This is a multiplier effect that feeds into the wider development conversation, creating a "community industry" (Bagus et al., 2019), which in turn will support job generation, business creation and scaling, as well as training and education opportunities for local populations. This can be seen through their Paramin Development Committee, which has been established since at least the 1980s (IICA, 2002; Rotary District 7030, 2023) but whose influence has waned in recent years just as other groups like the Paramin Women's Group (Trinidad & Tobago Newsday, 2014).

The village routinely has gatherings each week that involves the wider community, from bazaars (large fairs) to competitions for all-fours (a local card game akin to blackjack) and rounders (a popular ball game which is a vestige of the British colonial past). To further illustrate the profile of the mountainside village of Paramin, the perspectives of tour operators who were not subjects of this study were solicited, where they were willing to share their perspective on the importance of tourism to the village. In an interview conducted with the owner of Banwari Experiences in August 2025, they were able to give their perspective of the wider community in the tourism ecosystem. The owner pointed out that the local community was welcoming to tourists coming up but the social carrying capacity was affected at times due to local visitors. This came as a result of domestic tourists not knowing how to navigate the terrain of the hilly, mountainside community and often having residents distressed by this. This came especially after the construction of the Barre La Vigie lookout, the highest point in the village.

The rise in profile of the culture and heritage of the village was also spoken about during conversations with the tour operators. The natural heritage sites such as the La Vigie lookout, as well as the mountainside caves that historically were used by Maroons (enslaved people escaping the plantations) are now tourism points of interests for both domestic and foreign tourists alike.



Signage at entrance of La Vigie Lookout; photo taken by researcher in August 2025.



View of Caribbean Sea from Paramin La Vigie lookout; photo taken by researcher, August 2025

As noted from the personal exchanges with the tour operators, the village is mainly known for its agriculture – from their observations, both men and women are also very present in this activity. However, it is seen that men tend to gravitate towards the jobs of taxi drivers and bringing visitors and locals alike in and out of the village. Women who are farmers also veer towards entrepreneurship through processing and selling their crop yields and by-products at large markets in the capital city, Port of Spain, as well as smaller setups in the village. Products from Paramin are therefore very well known – creations such as pepper sauce and homemade wine are well-known throughout the island, as well as the chive grown from this area.

The perspective of women's influence and visibility in the community of Paramin was also highlighted, with the owner of Banwari Experiences noting that in his years of conducting tour experiences in the area, the community is driven by women. He was of the belief that their empowerment came as a result of organic growth, and the community was the area in which this growth was enabled. Acknowledging the agricultural background of the women who start in this field at a young age, the tradition of cultivating that they carry has given them the tools to branch out into other areas, and so they become entrepreneurs as they sell their crops and manage their farms in order to respond to market demands.

Now that the regional and national context surrounding tourism has been established, the following chapter will now discuss the methodology that framed the collection of valuable data critical to this work.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Approach

This research will focus on assessing the extent to which women are empowered in tourism-related activities in the rural village of Paramin. Thus, the study was conducted using a qualitative approach using a semi-open interview method with the women as the study subjects in the village. The data was then collected and refined to aid in answering the hypotheses of study and overall, the general point of the study.

To return to the further explanation of the methodology, the qualitative approach is known to be a means by which specific and deeper viewpoints are found when looking at real-world issues (Tenny, 2022). Dunwoodie, Macaulay, and Newman (2022) argue that the qualitative approach is ideal in instances where there is limited evidence or limited existing studies to guide the nature of the research. It is also useful when needing to describe and interpret research questions, and even for certain participants who would prefer to explain verbally their experiences instead of filling out a questionnaire. In social sciences, especially as it relates to qualitative research, the interpretations gleaned from individuals are crucial in order to properly study an experience. The subjectivity of these experiences is important for the researcher as well as the individual itself, as it can be detrimental in some cases to data collection and interpretation (Munhall, 2008). The semi open format then can allow the researcher to pose follow-up questions, and even attempt to broach sensitive or uncomfortable questions with reluctant participants.

The women's viewpoints were gathered through open-ended questions, such as the ones used to conduct the interviews of this study and is done through an ethnographic lens. Ethnography in qualitative research is defined as the "study of social interaction and culture groups ... defined as societies, communities, organisations or teams" (Reeves et al., 2013, p. 1366) and seeks to highlight the specific experiences, actions and events of the target population (Tenny, 2022). Lopez-Dicastillo and Belintxon (2014) state also that ethnography takes into account both the subject being investigated as well as the process of understanding that data from an "external, social or scientific perspective" (p. 523). It was highlighted that this study of human actions can be done in three ways, observing, interviews (formal and informal) and analysis of secondary information – however for the purposes of this study, interviews were selected as the means of data collection. This type of approach was ideal for the type of research that needed to be undertaken, where gathering the lived experiences of a small group of individuals needed to be personal so as to inspire trust.

Due to the fact that Paramin is a small rural community, case studies were the methodology decided upon. This type of research is common in social sciences and allows for the researcher to observe and learn from specific cases with a richer socio-cultural context (Xiao and Smith, 2006). In doing so, it gave a more intimate and deeper observation of the question at hand.

Further to this deeper observation and understanding, it allowed for the participants to speak about their “feelings, prejudices, opinions, desires, and attitudes towards different phenomena they experience” and thus, can allow for the researcher to conduct a study that cannot just be undertaken through predetermined, quantitative variables (Dunwoodie, Macaulay, Newman, 2022). In this context of women’s empowerment, Al-Mazroei (2017) posited that this sort of data capture gave space for the uncovering of “perspectives and complexities of marginalised groups” (p. 109).

The tourism industry and its informal nature allowed for the study to be conducted through visits to the participants’ homes, where the set up for their businesses are usually conducted. This was a positive for the interviews so that the participants could feel comfortable and less anxious to respond to the questions. The research was clearly presented and explained to the participants of the interview, who also agreed to be recorded per the consent form.

In some of the interviews, it was possible to briefly see how the subject’s business activities unfolded and how they interacted with the community – this helped to contextualise their responses during the interviews itself (especially as it related to relationships with the wider community, and their perception of self). This participant observation contributed an additional layer of depth to the data collected, and according to Guest et al. (2013), this is a technique that can be used in qualitative approaches to great benefit. In fact, they state that being able to imbed oneself into a particular context for research will open up more avenues to collect supplementary or complimentary data (some of the women spoke about their lives in general during and even after the agreed interview questions were over with) and allows the researcher themselves to understand social cues to know how to frame their questioning. This means that the interviews were done around the current reality of the participant or utilising more relaxed speech to engage at the level of the subject. More reasoning behind why this technique is a good tool for qualitative research is as follows:

1. Reducing reactivity: creating a “normal” environment so the participant also feels relaxed to give a “normal” answer;
2. Reducing interpretation issues: getting a unique intimate understanding of the data collected to reduce any kind of bias or error in understanding the data, a firsthand account

In other instances of the interviews, some obstacles arose such as noisy backgrounds, given that most of the interviews were conducted at their homes, close to the major roads that connected the village. Another issue that arose was nervousness, where for example, in one interview, a participant was hesitant to answer ‘incorrectly’ to the formal questions posed, and the questions needed to be reframed to encourage the expression of her thoughts. Care was

then taken to reassure the participant and build the rapport required. This is a common challenge that can arise in qualitative research, where interview participants are concerned with the interviewer's assessment of them (Collins et al., 2005).

Dundon and Ryan (2010) state in their study that rapport is built through attitudes that help the researcher to connect and engage with the interview participant and their worldview to build trust. According to the same authors, this is crucial in the bid to "rehumanise" (p. 5) research and get a richer sample of data. In this regard, none of the eventual participants declined to answer any of the questions posed to them.

Research Instruments and Measures

The interviews were constructed by drawing from the previous work and structures of other researchers that have studied similar areas. The works of other authors who previously studied on this concept were utilised to contribute to the structure of the questions, such as the works done by Al Mazroei (2017), Gutierrez, E.L. (2024) and Thien, O.S. (2009). Also, through using Turner's (2018) themes of social empowerment, the interview questions were able to be structured. The following themes were thus identified: capacity-building and human development, formation of organisations and associations, social capital and development, and finally, community development and community linkages.

Through this, the questions were formed to properly analyse the question of the women's perceived empowerment through these themes. These studies all utilised a semi-open interview approach to assist in their data collection and ensure a thorough collection of data based on the question of empowerment as it relates to women. The following table shows the breakdown of how these studies related to the major theme, as well as the hypotheses put forward to be proven:

Table 1

Relationship between major variable and study hypotheses against existing literature

Variable/Major Theme	Hypothesis	Study
Capacity-building and Human Development	H ₁ : Women's empowerment positively influences community development and quality of life	Thien, O.S. (2009). Women Empowerment through Tourism – From Social Entrepreneurship Perspective. Wageningen University and Research Centre.
Formation of Organisations and Associations	H ₂ : An increase in women's social capital positively influences community development	

Social Capital Development	H₃: Women’s social empowerment facilitates positive tourism development in communities	-- Al Mazroei, L.B.S. (2017). Questioning women’s empowerment through tourism entrepreneurship opportunities: The case of Omani Women. Edinburgh Napier University.
Community Development and Linkages		-- Gutierrez, E.L. (2024). Women’s Participation, Empowerment and Community Development in Tourism Areas in the Phillipines. Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University.

Sampling Technique for research:

The type of sampling technique done for this study was purposive, since it allows the research to select intentionally the type of “unit” (p.1) required per its relevance to the research question (Tajik et al, 2024). Considering the specific focus on women from the rural village of Paramin, this type of sampling was ideal as it allowed the focus on “specific characteristics” of a certain group of interest (ibid, p. 3).

With the structure of the interviews set, an initial approach was made with one of the women from the village in March 2025, a Community Leader in the rural village, and the rationale of the study was communicated. Through their assistance, contact was made and an initial group of five women were gathered through the network of the Community Leader. These interviews were conducted in July 2025. This individual became the interlocuter for the process, bridging the gap between the interviewer and the women of the study and becoming the sponsor for the research.

A second round of interviews was done in August 2025, where two other local tour guides from the community facilitated contact through their own connections – from this, another five women were identified for interviews and agreed after being presented with the rationale and consent for the study. The interviews were conducted both in-person and on the phone in order to fit with the demands of the women being interviewed. As mentioned above, ten women were interviewed eventually from a pool of eleven women identified through the researcher’s search and by word of mouth from already-interviewed women – only one woman was unable to be interviewed because of illness.

Ethical Considerations

The ethics behind conducting face-to-face interviews were weighed carefully, taking into account the potential challenges that could arise from gathering data. In this regard, some of the issues are noted by DiCiccio-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) as reducing risk of harm, protection of

participant information, effectively communicating the nature of the study and reducing exploitation of participants.

Through emails and a series of phone calls, the interviews were set up and governed by an invitation letter as well as a letter of consent for participation, which are included as appendices to this study. The ethical considerations for the study were structured through these two documents, attempting to provide a trustworthy environment for the women to consent to being interviewed – all information collected was treated with the highest form of confidentiality, and the women will be identified through letters for the purposes of this study.

Limitations

The major limitation of this study was the timeframe. As indicated by the literature on empowerment, as the phenomenon is an ongoing process, the period in which the study was required to be completed may not have been sufficient to fully capture the experiences of the women. Brief observations of some of the women while conducting their tourism-related activities were done, and it could have been worthwhile to carry this out for all of the participants. Also, considering the responsibilities of the women in their day-to-day activities, there were difficulties coordinating availability for their interviews, hence the extended period to complete the data collection. This also impacted the opportunity to do face-to-face interviews, as some participants' schedule only allowed for phone interviews, which could have impacted the richness of the data and the opportunity to build the rapport that could have been created through physical interviews.

This chapter discussed the methodology framing this research, detailing the rationale behind the collection of the critical data needed to support the objectives of the thesis. The following chapter will now analyse the data collected during the field work in the village.

Chapter Four: Analysis of Findings

To reiterate, the purpose of the study is to examine the perception of social empowerment felt by women in Paramin as they conduct community-based tourism (CBT) activities. Three hypotheses were selected to be examined and answered through the study, the first being that an increase in women's social capital positively influences community development. The second focused on positive tourism development in communities as a result of women's social empowerment, and the final hypothesis was focused on positive community development and quality of life because of such empowerment.

In terms of the entrepreneurial background of respondents of the interview, most of them were involved in gastronomic tourism, the definition of which is described as the activities surrounding the growing and preparation of cultural food products for visitors. This, according to Dixit and Prayag (2022), is important for rural communities as it allows for the preservation of cultural foods and other important heritage elements as well as establishing a sense of pride among the local population and generating viable, valuable opportunities for participation. Therefore, most of them focused on preparing an authentic taste of the rural village for both domestic and foreign visitors to experience. A breakdown of the roles and skills background performed by women in the village follows:

Table 2

Breakdown of participant background based on entrepreneurship and additional certifications

Participant ID	Role in CBT	Additional Role	Training/Certification
A	Tour company owner, tour guide	Farmer, homemaker	Hospitality school; tour guide certification
B	Food preparation – bakery	Retired	None
C	Food preparation – preserves and other traditional local sweets	Farmer	Tourism business workshop
D	Food preparation – preserves and other traditional local sweets	Farmer	Tourism business workshop
E	Food preparation – homemade wine	Agricultural processor (finalisation of crops for retail)	Hospitality school, winemaking course
F	Restaurant owner	Retired	None
G	Restaurant owner	Teacher, full-time	None

H	Tourism attraction owner – traditional village living	Farmer, food preparation	None
I	Tour guide	None	Tour guide certification

It was also noted that the entrepreneurial activities of these women fit well with the responsibilities found in their social lives. Upon review of the women's background information, all of the women had either children or lived in an extended family structure where they have responsibilities towards the household. From the breakdown above, two of the five women were also retirees, while the others were still below retirement age and even had double roles. In examining these demographic factors, the informality of the tourism sector provides the flexibility to conduct their tourism-related businesses while experiencing the benefits of being closer to their children and elderly family members. To illustrate the flexibility, the interviews were conducted right in their homes, during their commutes home over the phone or even while at work.

Al Mazroei (2017) utilised observational techniques as part of her study on women empowerment for a select group of women in tourism in her country of Oman. She noted the value of this type of research approach, which is used for ethnography and case study research, that allows for the observer to have a unique vantage point on the "daily activities, rituals, interactions and events" (p. 102) of the group of interest. Through this, the study was enriched by the opportunity to see how these women exercised their skills and business acumen, as well as a way to see the way they interacted with their wider community. When the interview with Participant H was being conducted, it had to be paused briefly to facilitate a small tour group of domestic visitors who came to see the traditional living site she had constructed at the front of her home, consisting of a traditional dirt oven and a cocoa drying house.

It was clear that her home was a popular spot on the route through Paramin, as she had a great rapport with the jeep drivers that passed on the mountainous road. Her job that day was simply to prepare coffee and cocoa tea, a traditional warm beverage made with locally grown, creole chocolate. While she prepared this in traditional enamel cups synonymous with the countryside of Trinidad, the tour guide gave the small group a tour of the traditional cocoa drying house, showing how cocoa production was done in the traditional way. This explanation involved placing the cocoa out on large trays and sliding open the roof panels of the building to allow the heat of the sun to dry it out for further processing. In front of the house also had a few panels written in Trinidad & Tobago French Creole – as mentioned before, the village is one of the areas on the island that spoke this language – and so, the tour guide also took his group through the history of the language and how it became a part of the country's rich culture. Another part of the tour also presented the homemade dirt oven, a usual method of cooking in rural villages

and is a surviving vestige of the Amerindian/First People and the heritage they left behind. By this time, Participant H prepared the warm drinks for the tour guide and his group, a local family who were interested in learning more about other parts of the cultural heritage of the country.



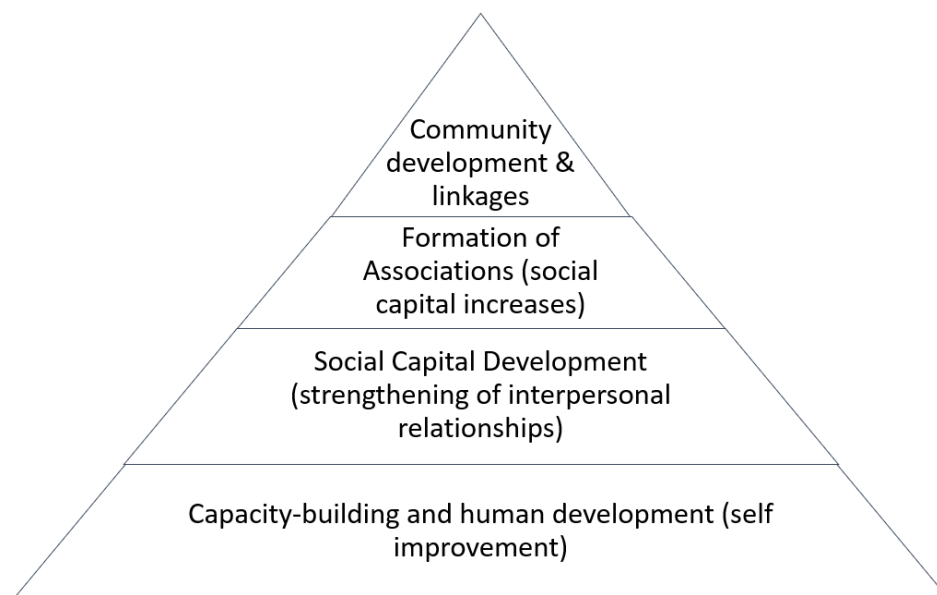
The traditional dirt oven used as a tourism site to illustrate the cultural and historical heritage of Paramin village for visitors. Photo taken by researcher, August 2025

Through this, it was possible to see how she interacted with the visitors, and her interactions with the tour guide who routinely brings visitors to her site despite it being on the outskirts of the Paramin village. Immersion into the lives of these women was important to lend as much richness to the data collection, as well as to contextualise the information gathered.

During the interviews, several sub-themes emerged that were then linked to the major themes of social empowerment for this study. To reiterate, the research identified the broad themes as capacity-building and human development, formation of organisations and associations, social capital development and community development and linkages. Empowerment can be likened to the amalgamation of building blocks upon which this state, this process according to Rowland (1997), can be achieved. According to the Literature Review, it is an ongoing, active state – through my understanding of the topics, the following has been illustrated:

Figure 8

The “pyramid” of empowerment, starting with self and ending with community



Improvement of Self – Capacity-building and human development

According to Turner (2018), human (capital) development is the act of teaching individuals to “elevate” or enhance their current skillset (p. 86). Following from the Literature Review, it must be reiterated that empowerment sets the stage for increased human development and increased capacity. As women participate in tourism-related activities due to their businesses, their development of self also increases. This can be through soft skills or certifications to increase their capacity and therefore, the hard skills needed to run their business.

While reviewing the data collected, it must be noted that the women participated in various upskilling activities, either to legitimise their businesses or to participate in knowledge sharing. Of the women interviewed, four of them noted that they became certified in a tourism-related certification course in order to increase their skills and enhance their business practices. Formalising their skills through the tourism certification as a springboard for their tourism business:

25 years ago. I am the person who devised this tour. I got up one morning, went to the garden, and the clouds, because it's amazing here. It's amazing. When you see the rain fall, and the clouds come, it settles low down. It is like super. And I sat and I looked at it and I said, this is something people would like to see. And that's when I started. I went to hotel school. Well, I found out about it then. How to go about it. And I went to hotel school.

I did get my tour guide's certificate, license, get certified then. And then I decided to, and when that, you know, I said, okay, great. So that's how it started.

(A)

Others did shorter, specialised tourism certificates ran by the national tourism body of the government which imparted knowledge surrounding tourism businesses and operations and set the foundation for their entrepreneurial endeavours:

Well, no, we just had an idea. Just an idea? Just an idea. And then we went to do the tourism community workshop at, it was at Hyatt Waterfront. We did the full course. Okay. And we got the certificate and all of that. It just grew. [...] Almost three years now. [...] We just got our business registered; we just got registration and everything.

(C)

Participant I in her interview shared that she decided to enter into the tourism industry after being faced with early retirement from her primary job in the medical field – after being convinced by her brother who was a tour guide for 25 years, she decided to become certified:

And I had some discussion with my brother, who had been a tour guide for over 25 years. And I was saying to him that I cannot sit still. I cannot stay home and actually retire and say, OK, well, all in the sunset, relax and do absolutely nothing. [...] And I started doing my research, found out that the courses were available at COSTATT¹, and I signed up for it. And then the rest was history where that was concerned. So, then I went, I did the course, I was successful in doing it. I never thought I could have made tour guiding a living in the sense of go over there, find tours, do tours, be a tour operator or be a tour guide full time.

(I)

However, the prominent commonality amongst the women is their background in agriculture, whether directly or indirectly – the rural village is mostly synonymous for its chive cultivation domestically and the local population has lived and thrived off of this boon. It was noted that the women still participate in subsistence agriculture in addition to their primary tourism business. An example is Participant H:

Plant, sell. I do. I do sell. (And how long have you been doing that?) Wow. This one is 20 years. Since I left school. 20, 20, 20 years. [...] Still planting. We love to plant. We love

¹ College of Science, Technology, and Applied Arts of Trinidad and Tobago.

gardening. I can't tell you how old people are. Gardening doesn't make you hungry. So we do gardening all the time.

(H)

We are farmers, naturally. So, we have been empowered long time, right? We have had this long time, we've been this way before. I mean, the women are the ones who go to the market to sell the produce, that kind of thing. So, we've always been at the forefront of things all along.

(A)

As it related to the remaining women, informal knowledge transfer was the theme, as the women increased their capacity through the direct community with whom they routinely interact, and where the transfer of skills for the preparation and preservation of cultural products (gastronomy) occur. They first were drawn to activity in the area through their love for food and sharing such with others in the community, which then by extension, spread to the visitors to the village:

You know, so they enjoy that. And then, you know, like, when people talk about your goods and stuff, it gives you that kind of encouragement. You know, like, even when I cook, and you're like, people, wow, this is so, you know, it makes you feel like, wow, I can do this. [...] Because people do enjoy it. And I like to see, when I do, when I cook, people sit and enjoy. It gives you that kind of encouragement that, you know, you can continue doing because you make people happy.

(B)

One of the women was thrust into her current business when her mother suffered a minor injury:

Well, the same time my mother started doing wine in the 80s. She had a little incident, she fell and cut her hand. So that was in 2017. So I decided I wouldn't let the business go to waste because she's so little, on a small scale and she never used to have enough. So I told her, well, let me continue it so it wouldn't go to waste and she showed me how to do it and that's it.

(E)

This supports the second hypothesis that focuses on the correlation between positive social capital and increased community linkages and development.

One of the interviewees spoke about her business' expansion and how its growth has come about:

So initially, it was just starting with something at home, something home-based. The neighbours would come around and we would cook and what not, one time a week and another time at home. It moved from that Thursday in the morning, it's on a Friday. From on a Friday evening, it would come down to on a Friday lunchtime and then it was too big for the house, it was too big for the yard. And then it was too big for the yard and I had to come down to the junction to come outside and see where we are. And here we are 10 years later.

(G)

The inclusion and meaningful participation of women in tourism unlocks transformation in many aspects, where individual livelihoods, poverty, the community and even the rural landscape can be positively affected (Irandu and Shah, 2014).

Social Capital Development

Based on the literature, social capital is a catalyst for the empowerment of self, as an increase in social capital benefits the health of social networks and community ties. Through the field work conducted, this was evident in the village of Paramin, where the close-knit community relies on each other and as a natural consequence, supports the tourism-related activities that are launched by the women in the village. This support ecosystem is seen through the example of two of the women, joint-owners of a food preservatives company, who use their business to support other businesses and families in the village:

But our establishment now is not based on us alone, because different people in the community who don't have access to the local, till they look out, they drop their stuff here. So for instance, the toolum² here is from the factory. The seasoning in the bottles is from the factory down the street. And pepper sauce. We make the preservatives.

This [points] is another lady from the community. This [points] is another lady from the community. So that only happens because people not close by. People in the community who are skilled, you know? So, we offer them. Okay, so it's more so like if they don't have transport to come out every day and that kind of thing. [...]

Some people live down that way. Some people live higher up. So we choose to help out.

(C), (D)

Their proceeds from these sales are returned to them on a weekly basis, which demonstrates the strong bonds of trust in members of the community and the values upheld by the women. This support system serves as a means of increasing resilience for these tourism businesses,

² A traditional sweet snack found on the island

especially if there are slow periods of business throughout the year or as explained by the except, when others are unable to fully operate their business due to a lack of means. This once again engenders trust and strong community ties, which furthers increases the social capital of the women.

As these women are active in their tourism businesses, their social networks increase and this leads to higher visibility for themselves. The external perception of the women also changed as they conducted their business within the community – the interviews pointed generally to a raise in profile for these women as respected and important figures within the village:

Definitely, yes. I'll tell you something. When I go out in the public, once I'm driving this Jeep, everybody knows me. Because somebody would have come on a tour and I'd say, well, I know you. I'm walking in the mall and a man says, well, I know you. I say, oh really? Who are you? He says, no, I saw you on television. And I say, oh, okay. You're the tour lady from Paramin? Yes, I am. I am the only lady who does this in Paramin.

(A)

When the term boss lady starts coming along [...] And I didn't understand. It's only at that point that my husband and my family was like. Yes, when people see you. You are the owner of the business. You are the one to call the shots. You are the one to say. Let's do this. Whatever it is. And the whole aura of the place changes when I am present. And it's not like it was meant to be that way.

(G)

When assessing how their activity in tourism has helped them perceive themselves differently, the commonality was confidence – the women felt more assuredness in the way they navigated the world, and their interpersonal relationships with others:

But, dealing with workers too. Yeah. That has enlightened me. Like, dealing with drivers. How I have to speak with them. Compared to normal. Because, I have to work at the time, I have to work first. So, the drivers, when I have to deal with the different aspects like latecomers. People who don't do their jobs good. You know, you have to pull up your socks. Some men are like boys still. So, that's why I think, yes, I got educated along that line. And I guess I learned to have a little more patience and stuff.

[...] Meeting people, meeting different types of people. Since I started doing tour guidance, it's like I have more control in terms of dealing with different types of people. Like, speaking to people. I could speak to the queen and I'll speak to the queen just like I'm speaking to you. Because, that is just me now. That's how I am now.

(A)

It was also evident the increase in their perception of self, another important tenet of empowerment. All of the women described feeling a greater sense of purpose thanks to their businesses from increased self-esteem and confidence. From Turner's 2018 study on women's empowerment in Western Cape, South Africa, there is a link made to support the psychological well-being of women from their social empowerment, and this was supported through the responses of the women.

From this point, this was evident in the soft skills that they were able to gain from their work, such as interfacing with visitors from foreign lands, negotiation and conflict resolution skills, self and business promotion, and even linguistic code switching as noted in the excerpt from Participant A – Trinidad & Tobago Creole with its grammatical structure and accent (which varies from urban to rural areas) can be difficult to understand for some foreign tourists, so the skill of modifying their language delivery is an important one to harness for their tourism businesses.

Formation of Associations

Following this study's analysis that posited that social empowerment of women positively impacts on the rural community's tourism development, this subtheme also has a large part to play in the empowerment of women.

To contextualise, Siisiäinen (2000) uses Putnam's work on associations and describes it as groups organised along social interests based on a mutual trust and confidence. The creation of such is a way of creating a sense of solidarity and formalises or institutionalises the capital that Bourdieu speaks of. Associations thus can be crucial for creating a space for a collective voice within any group, especially marginalised groups in wider society.

Based on my desk research, in this rural village the Paramin Women's Group was identified was the first association to focus on the livelihoods of women in the village. It provided training and education for the women in the community to learn skills that could be used to business ventures (IICA, 2022; fieldnotes transcripts).

From the interview done with one of the interviewees, her mother was a part of this group in the 1980s – the group usually convened in her family home, where the interview was being held. As such, she was able to give an intimate account about the history of the group and its history up to contemporary times:

My mother has (sic) been doing wine since the 80s. Okay. There was a women's group and that she was a part of and teachers would come up and teach them arts and crafts and to preserve fruits and wines and all that. So each person from the group decided, well,

who would, the lady of the room, Jean, like she was also in the class, so she makes homemade wine.

[...]

They used to give meetings right here. [...] And the tutors, different tutors would come up, and teach them different things. [...] Different like arts and crafts. And by the end of that moment, they had the first, they opened the first season factory up there. Okay. But all of them, they aged, they older now. Older. She's not in it anymore. And I think one or two of them still, kind of, do it.

[When asked if the group is still properly active:] Not as before, because a lot of unscrupulous people came in there, they see, you know, it's women and they wasn't wise to that. And a lot of people took advantage of them, and stole from them, and all that.

(E)

From the interviews, it was noted that while the women's group was active up to a certain point, the women that were part of this study were not actively a part of it. This could be attributed to a few factors, such as financial or time constraints, as noted in the study done by McCall and Mearns (2021). The initial group of women that started off in the 1980s are older now and, like Participant E stated, are unable to carry out their business as they used to. This can be highlighted as a challenge for CBT businesses, and even for sustainable tourism development, as critical skills and traditions could be lost or unable to be passed down to future generations for their safeguarding and preservation. For example, one of the participants spoke about the possibility of her children taking over her community business when she retires:

To be quite honest. When I've had this conversation many a times. As parents. And this is just us. We believe in having a well-rounded human being. As in you take the world as your oyster. And you experience it. You're not going to. At this stage in their life. They're not going to know what they want to do. And if that's okay. And if when that crossroad reach... for them to make an income and they choose to take over this business, that all well and good. But if they choose not to. That's fine also. Because we also don't want them to be in this business. And be miserable. It comes like if you go into a job. Nine to five. That's sitting behind a desk.

You don't want to do that. But you do it just for the sake of the money. And this business is passion. If you don't have the passion for it - not going to work. You'll get up miserable every single day. But yes. If they do choose to get into this. Then yes. The avenue is there.

For experiment and exposure. And learning and understanding. And taking it to a next level.

(G)

However, the interviews revealed that wider, non-gender focused associations within the community are present, and the women fully participate in their activities. An example of such is the community bazaar where food products prepared by the women are donated for the wider community:

When Paramin, when they have, like different, like if they're having some sports or stuff and they ask for a donation or something, she [participant's sister] would normally do stuff. You know? And like, well, what else? Like if we get involved in other, like, activities if they have and stuff, that's the only thing I can think about. Because like, if they have any harvest and stuff, we would normally go and participate. Contribute and participate and stuff like that.

(B)

Is more the church I does attend. If you have anything, I will take part in it. Because last year they had a big harvest. They had a harvest, like a Creole Day. And they asked me to come down to sell. So I had to take my business, not all, but take my business and I carry it down. Once they see HFC, they know that is my business. So yes, that is a big part of the community.

(F)

In one instance, Participant C and D described the visibility they gained from participating in such an event, where they were invited to neighbouring communities' collective events to operate their business and give publicity to their village:

In Parang, we play a big role in Parang. In Parang Fiesta festival, yes, that's the one. We play a big role in that too. We are not only here too because Diego Martin Regional Corporation, their Borough Day. This is our second year, which is carded on Friday and we will be a part of it too.

[So it's also a thing where you guys go out and you spread the word?] Yes, about Paramin.

(C), (D)

Participant G spoke about how despite not being active in any formal association within the community, she still attempts to create those networks on her own personal accord with residents and other business owners in the village:

I try my best to get in a lot of contact with the community. I'm very faith-based, when it comes to ministry and what not. For example, when they are having certain events in the community. Like these days we have rounders. That is happening. I try my best to get involved in that. And just really to interact with the councillors and what not.

And if anybody needs help in the community. They will always reach out to us. And not just me personally. But me as a business. As in how we can extend. How we can help. The younger ones also. When they come and they are interacting with me. And advice and what not.

And then when I am having conversations. Even besides my sister. There are other people in the community who are business owners. And we try to have conversations. Whenever we do get the opportunity to meet up. To try to encourage each other. And understand that we are not in this alone. But the struggles that I am facing. It is not unique just to me. And to try to kind of feed off of each other. So give that word of encouragement.

(G)

From the testimonies given by the women, it is reasonable to suggest that associations, while important as a key factor in community development and empowerment, it does not need to exist in a formal structure for these actions to take place. The women interviewed have not been actively involved in an association, especially one that is gender-focused, and yet are able to create their own linkages and contribute to the community industry that exists.

Community Development and Linkages

Roberts (2011) posits that community as a term is complex and multifaceted, but can be defined as an aggregation of individuals, groups or peoples within a specific geographical space and bonded by specific values, interactions and cultural heritage. Her work breaks down the community thus as:

1. location bound;
2. common shared social values between people and institutions
3. a sense of belonging from social interaction and cohesion.

Vogt and Jordan (2016) look at community similarly, but also states that they “solve shared problems or seize opportunities” (p. 2). The question of well-being is highlighted as a result of the development of a community – they gave an explanation of wellbeing starting at the grassroots level and as people came together to be bonded by specific values, social norms and eventually policies, this created the communities one can see today. As it relates to tourism and community development, the authors also support the definition of Roberts (2011) but also go on to add that when tourism is included in this perspective, the industry allows for

empowerment to be felt by people and builds their capacity to in turn enhance the areas in which they live.

Community tourism provides a platform for the development of spaces, services and facilitates that enable the development and activity of an attractive tourism product that is managed by the members of a specific community. Support can be given by larger institutions such as the government or non-profit government organisations (NGOs) but are mainly in the hands of residents, who should take care of elements such as public safety, amenities and activities. Also worth highlighting is the contribution of social norms and values to communities and the impact it can have on tourism activities. Once again, Vogt and Jordan warn against the erosion of culture through tokenisation and instead, push for a “balanced relationship” (p. 4) between resident and tourist so as to give an authentic experience, increase satisfaction and help with securing repeat visitors through word-of-mouth marketing.

Nevertheless, these concepts of the definition of community are what allows tourism-related activities in rural areas such as Paramin to take root, as these activities become specific to the area and now carry with it a specific and inalienable identity. This should be further supported by external institutions but mainly driven by the residents of an area through their interest and participation.

From interviewing the women, it was clear that they were visible and active in some way within the wider community of Paramin. From the two visits conducted to the village, it was possible to see the interconnectedness between the women and their fellow village residents. The community networks were strong, which was evidenced through the accounts given by the women: they relied on each other within the community for any services or any kind of help they needed. This was seen for example, with Participant C and D using their business to help support other community members' business endeavours by selling for them, or even Participant E recounting how she was approached by another woman about starting to sell her homemade wines as part of a tour. Even during the in-person interviews, while I was being taken around from home to home by one of the village tour guides, the women all knew each other by name and what they usually do, and were able to speak well about their business and how it contributed to the village. It was particularly noticeable through the tour guide routes and how the women were able to adapt and become an important part of the route, showcasing their quality of their business and the skills they have learned, either formally or informally.

The first benefit of this interconnectivity has been, as mentioned previously by Participant A and her being recognised in public for her tour company, the higher profile of the village in the national perspective. Paramin is now known as a major tourism point of interest for the country, and their tourism product is supported by the work of the women. To further illustrate this, the

organisation of specific routes in the village by the tour guides have given the women the opportunity to firstly, be a part of the tourism product the village offers, as well as the chance to hone their skills, share their crafts with visitors and participate in the preservation of their culture and heritage. On the standard tour through Paramin, the routes thus are strategically planned to include these businesses, who usually work on call and prepare their products and business accordingly for the arrival of visitors.

This chain reaction creates a community industry as mentioned earlier - Bagus et al. (2019) state that this mechanism is one where the tourism value chain should involve both the people that directly participate in tourism activity as well as their surrounding communities, who indirectly contribute to tourism but may not know it.

In this light, Participant I highlighted her active intention of curating a Paramin tour that involves members of her community, offering exposure and visibility for the community businesses:

When I do tours in Paramin, the seasonal tours, I try to do my tours around a team. But I prefer giving the people that experience of the total, complete part of Paramin, not just going and seeing what the Paramin village is like.

Like, what Paramin is made up of, that community is a close-knit community. And if you be part of community tourism, they actually teach you that. We went and I did some courses and some online classes and different things. And they said, local community tourism, you should really utilize the people belonging to the community. So if you decide to do a tour, you should try to use the people who cook in the community, the drivers who work from the community. So you can also attract another form of income for another individual.

So when I did my tours in Paramin, I sort of did them based on different teams and include, let's say for instance, the Christmas tours, I would include a Parang³ band from Paramin. I would try to get the Christmas time food, meaning what Paramin people enjoy at Christmas time for their meals. So we'd stop, we would get our homemade wine. I would try to put together a meal for the folks which would be the *pastelle*⁴ and the things like that, the black cake⁵ and so on. My sister, who still lives in Paramin, she really makes a really good black cake. So I always go to her for that. And then I have a cousin who cooks in Paramin, so I would go to her for that. So, you know, you find people who relate to the

³ As mentioned earlier, Parang is a traditional form of Christmas Carols native to Trinidad & Tobago, sung in Spanish.

⁴ Another traditional food eaten during the Christmas period in Trinidad & Tobago; a savoury seasoned meat filling in a cornmeal shelling with raisins and capers and steamed in fig/banana leaves. Similar to *hallacas* found in Venezuela.

⁵ Christmas fruit cake soaked in rum and cherry brandy

community itself, so you can help someone in the community. [...] Get some money, everybody happy.

(I)

Increasing business opportunities for members of the community so they can reap the benefits of the tourism activity in the area is one of the major tenets of sustainable tourism development – Bagus et al. (2019) once again state that this development in their opinion is based on “empowerment efforts, economic, social and cultural terms, is a tourism model that is able to stimulate the growth of sociocultural and economic quality of the community...” (p. 75).

Participant E highlighted that even before her business was incorporated into the usual Paramin tours that happen in the village, her primary market were the residents of the village themselves:

Well, the people, my customers, my customer base was the community because from my mother, she had her customers that would come on good days and occasion and Christmas, Christmas and Good Friday because the two up times⁶. So I would let, use the community, the community would bring fruits for me, they would bring bottles, I would reuse them. You know, put them through a process to clean it and all of that, and the fruits, any fruits in season, they would bring from it, I would either give them wine or pay them for it, whatever they choose.

And, but the, when they open the La Vigie site, that's when, [name withheld for confidentiality reasons] actually first, because they started doing tours and I never knew about it or anything like that, and [name withheld for confidentiality reasons] was actually the first person came to me and she told me, if they could come and do like, tasting and, so I told her, yeah, no problem because I always have extra in the cupboard, a whole cupboard full of extra wine. I told her, no problem and that's how it started with the tours passing here. And then, gradually more started coming, other tours started passing through.

(E)

This is a prime example of how the women's social capital is being used to create networks of opportunity and thus, supports the both the second and third hypothesis of social empowerment facilitating both positive tourism development in communities and overall community development.

⁶ Busy periods.

Gender Implications: experiences and reality

The women of Paramin traditionally occupy a central role in the activities of their village community, occupying roles perceived to be both 'masculine' and 'feminine'. In fact, one of the participants of the study explained in her words the archetype of a woman from Paramin, which helped to contextualise their role in the community:

Being in Paramin, you had that instilled in you from [a] child, from a little girl, from a little girl growing up, you know, your parents always had you working for what you needed, what you had to get, you had to work for it. It was never - I was never, and I know a lot of women in Paramin aren't like that, they never sat down and just expect things to appear. Even those who were employed out of Paramin, they all went out there, did their dailies, do their hard job or whatever work it was to make a living. And then alongside that, the women of Paramin themselves, it was instilled in them also to be a hardworking person or mother, whatever the case may be.

However, it must be noted that when asked about the gender implications of being a woman in tourism spaces, it was reported that gender dynamics could occasionally impede their activity. For example, Participant A ran her own tour company, registered and owned solely by her for the past 20 years – it grew from only her with her personal jeep to currently a fleet of old-model Land Rovers driven by other village dwellers who take visitors up the steep mountainous terrain.



Typical jeep used to navigate the mountainous territory in Paramin. Photo taken by researcher, August 2025

However, she did report that occasionally there were tensions that seemed to be fuelled by solely her gender:

And it is also, basically men who work for me, it's a fight down^{*7}.

Yeah, it's a fight down. Because all those drivers, when I give them jobs, they always offer their numbers to my clients. That one driver who just go there with the green jeep, that's my group tour people. I didn't know that until one of the ladies said to me, 'But [name withheld for confidentiality] I see this guy, and he come with a tour but that's your people.

[The men think], you know shouldn't be in control of them, that kind of way, or they think that I shouldn't be making anything from [them] or they should be getting yeah, they should be getting everything. So I don't bother about it.

A similar sentiment was shared by Participant G who believed some of her challenges in her line of work as a business owner was related to her gender:

It has a huge part (to play). Because I think a lot of people on the whole doubt have the abilities of women. Society. And that dates back to years where society believe a woman place is to be at home. They gave children. They make babies. They get married. They pay the house. What not and what not.

And that has shifted. And it has to shift because time has changed. Whereby one salary no longer matters. I'm a teacher by profession. So yes, I have a business with my husband. But this here has to help out with what I'm still doing at my 9 to 5. So yes, being a woman in this industry is very challenging.

It has its pros and cons. It has its advantages and disadvantages. There are certain things people will not do for me... because I'm a woman. But if my husband steps in the front, it's a whole different world. So yes.

Stereotypes of women continue to be prevalent in tourism work, especially in areas that are not considered to be 'service-facing' – A is the only female jeep driver in the village where most of the drivers on the route into the village are men. Perceived as a 'man's' job, the friction between her in a position of power in comparison to the men she has to manage on a daily basis had the potential to be an obstacle to her business and her empowerment. Nevertheless, the soft skills learned from interacting with various people and temperaments, as discussed in the section on capacity building, has been a vital tool for her. Further to this, as the literature pointed out that women tend to not occupy management positions and positions where business decisions take

⁷ Trinidad & Tobago Creole: when someone refuses to acknowledge your efforts or achievements because they feel you do not deserve it

place, the sentiments of Participant G are also commonplace and align with the prevailing stereotypes of women in tourism areas unrelated to service provision.

To contrast these examples, Participant E stated that her gender actually aids her businesses more. She was a saleswoman before taking over her mother's homemade wine business and her experiences in that affirmed her belief that people looked at her favourably and was more willing to do business with her because she was a woman:

I think, being a woman, is, an advantage. Because, with the door business, my husband used to tell me, girl if I go they wouldn't... but if you go they will (laughs) you understand?

He said, he used to push me in front. You, you, you go. You, you could talk to them. You know how to talk to them. And, I would get through with a lot of deals. Uh huh. Because, as her say, people have a soft heart for women. Okay. If you give them a chance, than a men, than a man.

I think it's an, an advantage actually. It's, it's different, it's different to the, work world.

(E)

Chapter Four: Discussion

As noted previously, empowerment in its quality of an active process, can be found in the accounts of the women as a common thread. They all felt empowered through their community tourism businesses, but what was interesting was that economic empowerment was not stressed as the most important. In fact, their social empowerment was spoken about the most through the interviews.

Factors such as contribution to social cohesion, and their own self-actualisation were identified as common with all of the women. To better illustrate how these factors are linked to the themes and subthemes of this study, the following table shows the linkages:

Figure 9

Outcomes based on factors of empowerment

Empowerment Factor	Subthemes	Outcomes
Self-actualisation	<p>Education and Upskilling: certifications, business registration and expansion, knowledge sharing</p> <p>Trust, support systems, shared values, increased perception of self and contribution to community</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Greater agency through personal growth 2. Increased knowledge from formal training and certifications and interfacing with the public 3. Increased self-confidence
Social cohesion	<p>Strengthening of community businesses, promotion of cultural heritage</p> <p>Women's groups, partnerships, workshops</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Closer ties to the community, closer interpersonal ties with village residents 2. Profile is well-known - increased status, such as specific titles like Community Leader

Based on the factor of self-actualisation, it was clear from the data stemming from the interviews with the women, that women in tourism-related businesses perceived a greater level of growth as it relates to their perception of self and their skills. With reference to the former, an increase in the self-confidence of the women led to changes in their psyche – they saw themselves as fulfilled and strong, and were able to verbalise the value that they contributed to their immediate social circle. This self-confidence also translated to the ways in which they interacted with the

wider community, where feelings of shyness and reluctance were shrugged off when necessary. This choice, as the literature has detailed, is evident as an element of empowerment.

Of course, the benefit of a larger skillset will only serve to enhance self-confidence – having greater specialised knowledge to support their community business and its operations has allowed the women the ability to sustain strong business activities. Entrepreneurship and self-employment is an alternative to the traditional job market that for now continues to impede true expansion and inclusion of women in the tourism industry. Through the experiences of the women interviewed, the conclusion that education, whether through formal means like certifications and workshops, as well as informal education through the transmission of specialised skills are undoubtedly a key towards the unlocking of greater empowerment for women. While not all of the women went through a specific training or certification path to become a part of this industry, they were still able to rely on their self-confidence to make their CBT business profitable and valuable – a specific reference to Stroma Cole's and one of her Three A's of Empowerment: agency and making things happen.

From the researcher's perspective, a community coexisting under the same values can be described as social cohesion. From the data collected, the formation and presence of associations are the first step towards this. However, while the literature consulted for this study suggested the presence of such groups in Paramin, there are first-hand accounts to confirm that the association geared toward women is not as relevant as it was thirty or forty years ago. An explanation for this is a myriad of factors, such as aging residents, exploitation, lack of interest, and even younger generations simply choosing to not participate in the associations. When asked as part of the interviews, none of the women were active within the Paramin Women's Group as noted in the literature. This points to a weakness in institutional capacity and structures within the country, as noted in previously in this research paper. The top-down approach utilised mainly in tourism development policy in the country, especially as it relates to the implementation of community-based tourism projects, is not conducive to the longevity of institutional frameworks that could better support grassroots or community tourism projects.

However, the community as a larger ensemble has an overarching association that is not gender-focused – here is where some of the women were able to participate, contributing their time and products towards community-based initiatives and events right in the community and in neighbouring areas. However, despite the low influence of the women's group in particular on the women's CBT businesses, it has not impeded their growth. This is then is in opposition to the literature where associations did indeed play a key role in women's empowerment. Some women reported growth as it related to business operations and longevity. This means that associations had a negligible impact on their social empowerment, contrary to Turner (2018).

Despite this, as their business operations grew, their empowerment increased in similar stride. With reference to the literature, McCall and Mearns (2021) description of the chain reaction that comes from economic empowerment to community development comes back to the fore. It was noted through the interviews that the longer the women continued to exercise their business activity in the community, the more palpable their relationship with empowerment. For the women who operated in spaces such as tours and gastronomy within the community, one of the benefits of their empowerment is that it helps to support the preservation of traditions and cultural heritage for the community of Paramin. Their contribution thus to community development is another positive consequence of their empowerment.

Perception of Empowerment

As mentioned, perception is important when assessing external factors or stimuli for an individual. This cognitive process facilitates the understanding of the current reality in which an individual finds themselves, and their acceptance or negation of such. The way then that empowerment is perceived is critical to this study. It also highlights how the women's testimonies and lived experiences varied from one another, supporting the study of McDonald (2011) who stated it is indeed a unique experience.

As it relates to the testimonies of the women who participated in tourism-related businesses within Paramin, their definition of empowerment was mediated through their realities. As some of the highlighted examples, Participants C and D spoke about their empowerment through their business endeavours and the financial impact on both themselves and their fellow business owners:

I thank God every day that God gave me that idea. Because we never thought of this. But in terms of livelihood and whatever, this business is helping us very well.

Very well. And like I said, not only us. Even the cake lady or the telephone factory [is] glad for the sale on a weekend.

(C), (D)

The idea of spirituality and faith was also mentioned when discussing empowerment:

Empowerment being like, you have your own thing to do and you will do it with confidence. You have to keep strong. You have to keep strong and have the faith to keep going. Anything that you do, you just have to have the faith and keep strong.

(F)

Empowerment for me. It has two sides to that coin. Because I personally believe that you can't empower anybody else if you yourself isn't filled. You can't fill anyone if you are

empty. So I personally believe that empowerment is finding within yourself who you are. Finding what is authentically you. Finding what is your purpose. Why you were placed here. Finding what makes you happy. That gets you to get up and go on a daily basis.

And using that to drive you forward. So that whoever you do interact with - whether male or female, man woman or child – you can empower them in return to go get what is that they need to get.

But it starts with you. Yourself. That journey of self and understanding who you are. Grounding yourself in your faith. Whichever faith that may be. And really and truly understanding why you are here. What is the purpose of you being here. And filling yourself and grounding yourself. And reflecting. That's another thing. That's a big thing to me. Reflecting on what is taking place. And how we communicate to people and so on. And how we impact others in the decisions that we make.

So that when you are okay. You can then in turn when you meet up. Fellow females. Who are trying to do this. You can in turn empower them. But empowerment really is a force that pushes you forward. It starts with you.

(G)

I feel empowered already. In the sense of me being independent, on my end, doing something I wish to do myself – this is how I feel empowered. A choice that was not made for me. Even though somebody says yes, you still work for somebody at the end of the day yes, but I feel so empowered knowing that most of my decisions are made by me.

(I)

Through the excerpts above, commonalities were found in the perception of empowerment experienced by the women. Agency, from Cole's work, returns to the forefront, as well as autonomy and authority. The women felt most empowered when they were able to make their own decisions to take care of their own needs and endeavours within the village. In turn, they saw themselves becoming well-respected and well-known, acting as important ties in the village network.

For some of the women, the empowerment was felt most acutely from within themselves. As noted in the literature and supported by the interviews of these women, it was clear that their self-esteem and their increase in their confidence was the starting point for them and a obvious outcome of empowerment through their tourism-related businesses.

For others, they utilised this sense of empowerment to positively affect the lives of those around them for their own betterment. One of the major themes in these excerpts, which aligns with the

work of Rowlands again, is that empowerment really acts as a mediator on the individual that is being subjected to it. Through a process that begins of their own volition, other factors (such as the willingness and support of their community) converge to further increase their empowerment. It is reasonable then to conclude that through empowerment, the women's social capital was increased and as such, their social empowerment had a positive impact on both holistic community development and the tourism development of Paramin. This should also have a positive impact on the overall sustainability of the village, as their strong networks will allow them to bolster the resilience of its residents and provide support to those who are in need.

Based on the discussion above, the concept of empowerment is well-experienced through the women of Paramin and their entrepreneurial activities. It is clear that through their owned community-based tourism activities and businesses, they are able to perceive clearly their empowerment, which adds great value to both their personal livelihoods and their social capital. As such, it is understood that empowerment comes as a consequence of participating in community-based tourism activities in the village of Paramin, as reflected in the results of the study.

Conclusion

The overall objective of this research was to assess the perception of empowerment felt by women in the rural village of Paramin, Trinidad & Tobago. As tourism is a vital component of the economies of the Caribbean region, it was necessary to contextualise the current realities of the industry and why the empowerment of women could contribute, either positively or negatively, to the transformation of the sector. Thus, the research questions were conceptualised and explored throughout the study in order to explore the impact of empowered, women-led activity on growing, healthy tourism economies and its application in Trinidad & Tobago.

The Literature Review delved into the key concepts of empowerment and social capital. Empowerment has been discussed at length by several authors, but the essence of the theory was as such: a dynamic, ongoing and active process that begins with self and ends with community sharing social values and obligations for continued empowerment. Also, a review of community-based tourism and its definitions and applications throughout the world, the Caribbean and finally Trinidad & Tobago was conducted to highlight how empowerment acted as a mediator or came about as a consequence of community-based activities.

The rise in profile of Paramin, a village in rural Trinidad that has leveraged their natural resources to become a vibrant CBT hotspot, was also explained to set once again the context for the study, which then highlighted the presence and participation of women in the community's tourism value chain. Through the analysis of the data collected, it is reasonable to conclude that there exists empowerment of the women in the rural village based on Turner's delineation of social empowerment. Only one of the criteria for social empowerment, presence and formation of associations, was not as prevalent as the women operated outside of these institutions routinely.

To conclude, were the research questions properly explored through the study? It was noticeable that community-based tourism indeed empowered women in rural Paramin. The hypotheses put forward in the study were focused on the correlation between facets of women's empowerment: it was positively confirmed that the increase in women's social capital and by extension, social empowerment had a positive outcome on wider community development, tourism development in the village as well as on their quality of life. Through social connections and networks, they were able to use their tourism-related activities to better both themselves, their livelihoods and the overall development of their community. Following this, the community has experienced greater development through increased infrastructural projects that help to support the increased number of visitors to the village as well as enhance further their quality of life. The community of Paramin as such is now well-known as an attractive tourism product domestically, but it was noted that while it is popular with some foreign tourists, it has yet to become as visible as other tourism activities on the island like the yearly Carnival festivities.

A recommendation stemming from the outcomes of this study would be to have greater government involvement in the creation and maintenance of gender-focused policy, in order to enhance the baseline outcomes found in this research paper. Increased institutional capacity is crucial for creating an enabling environment for the positive development of tourism in a destination, and could come in the form of the creation of women-focused associations, capacity building initiatives to support the women in both business and management skills and a clear monitoring and evaluation framework to ensure longevity and sustained value added to the women and the national tourism product. This could be beneficial for Trinidad & Tobago as they chart a course towards a stronger, more attractive and diverse tourism product.

As it relates to future studies on this phenomenon, this study could be applied to other groups of women within other popular rural tourism areas of Trinidad & Tobago – much like the areas of Lopinot, Matura and Castara that were identified in this paper. This would be useful in potential work on the development of more gender-focused tourism policy being developed on the island, mapping the positives and the gaps that should be addressed. Other rural areas on both islands could use the results from studies like this one to organise themselves on a community level, especially in the case of women-focused organisations.

The most obvious limitation of this study is the time constraints due to the researcher's course of study – as seen with Al Mazroei's work, it would have been ideal for this study of the women to have lasted longer to incorporate more observational techniques surrounding the women's work. The study's gender lens also narrowed the scope of study. While conducted the in-person interviews, it was noted that it was easier to find men at first in the community, such as the other tour guides who were men, or the husbands of the women interviewed. Further to this, the study's use of secondary information as it relates to the history of Paramin was limited and as such, direct contact needed to be made with people directly connected to the community in order to get richer information for the purpose of this work.

As the tourism industry is urged to transform and move towards more sustainable methods of operations, it is critical that once marginalised groups become the key towards this change. Looking at the immense potential that women have in the global workforce, it would be remiss of tourism destinations to not plan policies through a gendered lens that brings more women into focus. Ensuring that there is first a facilitative environment for women to be presented with opportunities to be seized and thrived is of utmost importance. Combining this with the power of tourism and its potential for sustainable development in rural areas can bring about the real change that is supposed to occur with tourism. There is still a lot to be done to uplift women and propel their empowerment, but with the perspectives expressed in this study, the right steps are being taken.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Variable	Hypothesis	Question	Source
Human Capital/Social Development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social capital and its effects 	H₁: An increase in women's social capital positively influences community development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you perceive more respect/recognition/appreciation as a community leader? Do you feel more connected to your community? Better social network? Do you think your activity in CBT projects supports the growth of your community? What do you wish to see develop further within the community? 	Thien, O.S. (2009). Women Empowerment through Tourism – From Social Entrepreneurship Perspective. Wageningen University and Research Centre.
Formation of Organisations/Associations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empowerment, Social Capital 	H₂: Women's social empowerment facilitates positive tourism development of communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can you describe the organisation in your own words? What are the main objectives/mission of the organisation What are the tourism-linked projects/initiatives you currently have? (Prompt: agritourism, gastronomic tourism etc) Do women need to meet any criteria to be involved in these projects/initiatives? What criteria? 	Thien, O.S. (2009). Women Empowerment through Tourism – From Social Entrepreneurship Perspective. Wageningen University and Research Centre.
Social Cohesion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Livelihoods, quality of life 	H₃: Women's empowerment positively influences community development and quality of life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What does empowerment mean to you? Do you believe that you're more empowered/less empowered through these community projects? How has your livelihood changed? More educated/more skills/more connections/better home life? Less? What major challenges do you see that impede your empowerment? 	-- Al Mazroei, L.B.S. (2017). Questioning women's empowerment through tourism entrepreneurship opportunities: The case of Omani Women. Edinburgh Napier University. -- Gutierrez, E.L. (2024). Women's Participation, Empowerment and
Community development, Tourism Linkages to wider community			

			Community Development in Tourism Areas in the Phillipines. Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University.
Other questions to be posed:			
Demographics:		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age • Educational Background • No. of Dependents • Marital Status • Current Employment 	Gutierrez, E.L. (2024). Women's Participation, Empowerment and Community Development in Tourism Areas in the Phillipines. Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University.

Appendix B: Invitation Letter

To Whom it May Concern,

My name is Khadesha La Touche, a final year Masters student at the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria, based in Peniche, Portugal. For my final year dissertation, I have decided to study the impact of community-based tourism on women and their perceived level of empowerment in Trinidad & Tobago. This letter serves as an invitation to consider your participation in this study.

The aim of my research is to attempt to study the perception of empowerment felt by women in tourism-based activities in rural communities, of which Paramin was selected as a case study. The tourism industry has the potential to provide real and meaningful change for people's livelihoods and quality of life, and for this, it was personally important to explore areas through which this can be achieved. I would like to explore how empowerment through tourism activities have shaped the lives of women and their personal development, and how this impacts their wider community and its sustainable development.

Therefore, I wish to invite you to take part in the research as part of my case study. I hope to hear about your stories as women who participate in and lead these activities in the community of Paramin. Women that work in any tourism-related activity such as guided tours, to artisan crafts and food production and cultural event curation for example, are invited.

Participation in these interviews will be done in-person at a date most convenient – it is tentatively set for the **28th of June, 2025**. If not, virtual interviews can be facilitated through the Zoom platform at your convenience.

The interviews will be recorded to facilitate accurate data collection. Participation is also *voluntary*, and the information collected will remain confidential and private. You are able to withdraw from it at any time without any consequence.

If you have any questions or concerns surrounding this invitation or the scope of the study, please contact me at khaddiemaria@gmail.com. I look forward to speaking with you about your perspectives on empowerment through tourism.

Sincerely,

Khadesha La Touche

Appendix C: Consent Form

Name of the researcher: Khadesha La Touche

Title of the study: **Power and Empowerment: community-based tourism and the perception of empowerment experienced by women in the rural village of Paramin, Trinidad & Tobago**

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study on empowerment and women in tourism-related activities.

With your participation in this study, you agree to consider and answer the questions to the best of your ability. Confidentiality is of the highest importance for myself as the researcher in order to conduct a successful and ethical study. Furthermore, this consent form also provides provisions for yourself and your comfort while being interviewed, as follows:

- I confirm that I have understood the project objectives and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction;
- I understand that my group participation is voluntary and that we are free to withdraw from the project at any time, without having to give a reason and without any consequences;
- I understand that we can withdraw our data from the study at any time.
- I understand that any information recorded in the investigation will remain confidential and no information that identifies the group will be made publicly available.

Participant Confidentiality Agreement:

After thorough consideration, I accept to participate in the decision-making process for the aforementioned study. I consent to being recorded. I pledge to keep everything about this study strictly confidential.

In exchange, I accept that any information I disclose about myself voluntarily will be kept strictly confidential.

Signature of Participant

Date: