

# Empowering women through ecotourism: A case study of women's involvement in the Wachau hippo sanctuary project in Ghana

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## ABSTRACT

### Keywords:

Ecotourism  
Sustainable tourism  
Women empowerment  
Women involvement  
Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary

Community-based ecotourism has been promoted globally as a sustainable development model that can improve the well-being of women through income-generating opportunities, by raising gender awareness and empowering women. This study aimed to assess the involvement and empowerment of women in ecotourism in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary Area. A concurrent mixed-method design was employed to gather data from 182 respondents comprising 162 women from individual households and 20 women's group executives within four selected communities around the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary, Ghana. A qualitative descriptive analysis method and the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) using frequencies and percentages were employed in the analysis of the data. The study found that women's involvement in ecotourism development in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary area took two forms; the provision of support services for tourists/the sanctuary and the management of the sanctuary. The study revealed that women feel empowered psychologically, socially and economically but not politically. The study recommends that project stakeholders must undertake intentional efforts to create an inclusive and gender-responsive environment (such as allocating a percentage of the representation of the management meetings to women, recruiting and training women as tour guides within the sanctuary) ensuring that women have the opportunity to actively participate in decision-making processes (by training or employing the services of an interpreter during meetings to interpret the proceedings of the meetings to all to understand) to help women contribute to the overall success and sustainability of the Hippo Sanctuary.

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## 1. Introduction

Since its inception in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, ecotourism has become a carried-out economic solution and a means of resolving the adverse social and environmental impacts of tourism in communities. Since then, international organizations such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), many governments, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have considered ecotourism as a means to promote the conservation, development, and empowerment of local communities through tourism (The International Ecotourism Society, 2015; UNWTO 2016). As a type of tourism, ecotourism is regularly hawked for the chance that it offers community involvement in tourism, and, more significantly, for nature protection and the age of economic advantages for residents. As indicated by Alarcón and Cole (2019), ecotourism projects uphold and support the development of rural communities, yet also address the needs of ecotourists. Studies have shown that women's involvement in ecotourism projects is imperative for the

sustainability of such undertakings (Scheyvens, 2000) and could be viewed as a formative and protective component. Women are making critical commitments to the development of their communities, from bringing pay to their families as employed workers, making jobs as business persons, and dealing with their families and older people. Women play a basic role in the entirety of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as established by the United Nations Organization.

In addition, the increasingly important roles that women play in the social and economic advancement of societies have now been broadly acknowledged and accepted worldwide (Mahmud & Becker, 2012). Hence, there is a developing agreement among researchers that empowering women can be both an end and a way to accomplish social and economic developmental targets (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014; Eyben, 2008). It has been argued that improving women's confidence will help tackle inequalities and discrimination confronting them (Mahmud & Becker, 2012). Furthermore, others (e.g. Cornwall &

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Edwards, 2014; Eyben, 2008) have suggested that putting resources into comprehensive prospects for women and girls will advance their economic, social, and political collaboration and improve their access to social protection, business, and control of natural resources. This will bring about a more beneficial economy, reduce poverty and imbalances, and upgrade human capital and ecosystems, consequently offering quieter and more versatile social order (UN Women, 2018b; UN Women, 2016; UNDP, 2016a; World Bank, 2011).

Women have a basic task of accomplishing the SDGs. Most of the 169 targets explicitly perceived women’s empowerment and equality as both the goal and the means of achieving other goals (Alarcón & Cole, 2019). Women’s empowerment can be utilized to advance economic development and work efficiency (productivity) (SDG 8) and improve human capital through health (SDG 3) and education (SDG 4), which have significant ramifications for poverty reduction (SDG 1). Gender equality and women’s empowerment are also critical for achieving food security (SDG 2) and addressing climate change (SDG 13), while additionally reinforcing adaptability to climate-related catastrophes and overseeing natural resources. In addition, giving equivalent opportunities to women’s participation in the decision-making process will be advantageous for guaranteeing a more peaceful and inclusive society (SDG 16) (Kabeer & Natali, 2013). The words of the late United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, summarized it when he said, “There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women” (Kulkarni, 2017).

Both theoretical and practical evidence suggests that ecotourism has the potential to empower local women psychologically, socially, economically, environmentally, and politically through female participation and involvement in ecotourism projects (Das & Deori, 2014). Empowering women by building their capacity will increase the likelihood of their support and involvement in community activities such as ecotourism development. Despite the global recognition of ecotourism as a tool for sustainable development, there is a paucity of research on the specific impact of community-based ecotourism projects on women’s empowerment, particularly in Ghana. While previous studies have explored the broader social and economic effects of such projects (Afenyo, 2012; Amoako-Atta, 2020; Kosoe & Osumanu, 2015; Wuleka, 2012), there is a notable gap in our understanding of the dynamics of women’s involvement and empowerment. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary Area, a unique case in Ghana where the nexus between women’s participation in ecotourism development and their empowerment remains largely unexplored. Through an in-depth analysis, this research seeks to shed light on the potential psychological, social, economic, and political empowerment that women can experience through active participation in ecotourism projects. By doing so, it contributes to the broader

discourse on the role of women in achieving the sustainable development goals as outlined by the United Nations, and provides valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners in the field of ecotourism and community development.

## 2. Literature Review

### *Concept of empowerment*

The concept of empowerment lacks unison among researchers to understand the term. Researchers (e.g., Francina, 2013; Mandal, 2013) have attempted to describe this term from their point of view. The term empowerment has various implications (enablement and ableing) in various sociocultural, economic, and political settings. The exploration of local terms related to global empowerment has consistently included a wide variety of definitions. However, Kabeer (1999) expressed a widely recognized view of empowerment as the process by which individuals who have denied the capacity to settle on decisions procure such a capacity. It is also recognized as a process through which women accomplish expanded commands over an open dynamic (Longwe, 2002). Empowerment is acknowledged as a continuous multidimensional process that includes the movement of individuals from a condition of vulnerability and hardship to one in which, especially the most minimized, it has a more noteworthy impact, power, and command over their assets (Boley et al., 2016; Kabeer, 2017). Empowerment can be considered one of the easiest ways of giving voice to women, reducing poverty among women and individuals in the community; in both cases, some researchers (Irandu & Shah 2016) underscored the removal of obstacles to the involvement of the poor (e.g., women) in community decision-making, thus linking both economic and political forms of empowerment. Empowerment is the result of both relational and aggregate social activities (Lv QunChao et al., 2019).

### *Dimensions of empowerment*

The majority of the agreement in the literature points to the fact that people, especially women, can be limited and at the same time empowered psychologically, socially, economically, and politically based on the availability or unavailability of opportunities such as platforms for activity involvement in community-based projects, including ecotourism (Arroyo et al., 2019; Boley et al., 2018; Francina, 2013). Psychologically, empowerment has been elucidated by Francina (2013) as a critical aspect of women's empowerment, manifesting itself as self-control and mastery over one’s circumstances. Empowerment is cultivated through confidence, self-esteem, pride, and self-efficacy, and contributes to psychological well-being and happiness (Arroyo et al., 2019). The Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary project enhances women's psychological empowerment by acknowledging and promoting the uniqueness of their culture and traditional knowledge (Boley et al., 2018). The resulting boost in confidence

encourages women to seek further education and training opportunities, thereby promoting personal growth and development. Stronza and Gordillo (2008) emphasized that psychological empowerment is a non-economic benefit derived from ecotourism, fostering residents' support for tourism initiatives. Masi et al. (2003) defined psychological empowerment as an individual's capacity to make decisions and exert control over their lives, incorporating a sense of perceived control and goal internalization. Psychological empowerment, which is intertwined with self-efficacy, is crucial for women's perception of self-confidence.

Boley et al. (2016) stated that empowerment revolves around cohesion and collaboration within a community. As Scheyvens (1999) described, ecotourism serves as a catalyst for social empowerment by fostering community cohesion and cooperation. The shared benefits of ecotourism initiatives, such as improved infrastructure and community development projects contribute to a sense of unity and cooperation among residents. However, caution is warranted, as highlighted by Stronza and Gordillo (2008), who warned that ecotourism could lead to social segregation and disintegration. Moswete and Lacey (2015) elaborated on social empowerment, emphasizing multifaceted improvements in social standing, opportunities, reproductive autonomy, and educational prospects. Nevertheless, Mwangi (2005) cautioned that not all ecotourism ventures guarantee social empowerment, as evidenced by the lack of significant benefits to certain communities.

Political empowerment, as advocated by Kulkarni (2017), focuses on granting women power to influence decisions that directly affect them. The success of the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary project in political empowerment hinges on women's active participation in the decision-making processes. However, as highlighted by Scheyvens (2000), dictatorial or self-interested leadership may marginalize women and hinder their involvement in decision-making. The inclusion of women in decision-making bodies and initiatives is crucial for community-based ecotourism projects to be successful and sustainable (Qunchao et al., 2019). Ensuring that women's voices guide the development, implementation, and evaluation of ecotourism initiatives is imperative to fostering political empowerment.

The economic dimension, which represents a pivotal measure of women's progress, enhances their access to economic resources and opportunities. This includes jobs, financial services, property, and skill development, with the aim of reducing poverty and increasing women's control over productive resources. Economic empowerment, as per OECD (2010), contributes to self-confidence and enables women to assert themselves in household decisions. However, pervasive cultural, social, political, and economic barriers impede women's economic empowerment (Narayan-Parker, 2005). Ecotourism

projects, while offering economic benefits, often perpetuate gender disparities, with local elites reaping rewards and women facing discrimination in formal employment opportunities, as Scheyvens and Scheyvens (2010) highlight. The literature warns that without addressing these issues, the economic empowerment of women within ecotourism projects remains a challenging and incomplete endeavour, as emphasized by Irandu and Shah (2016).

Overall, the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary project has far-reaching implications for women's empowerment, spanning psychological, social, political, and economic dimensions. While psychological and social empowerment are positively influenced by the acknowledgement of cultural uniqueness and shared benefits, political and economic empowerment faces challenges related to leadership dynamics and gender disparities in decision making and resource allocation. To achieve comprehensive empowerment, it is imperative to address these challenges and ensure that women's voices are not only heard but also play a guiding role in the development and sustainability of ecotourism initiatives.

#### *Women's empowerment and ecotourism development*

Thus, the role of ecotourism development in the discourse on women's empowerment cannot be overlooked. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has emphasized this connection, evident in the choice of the theme for World Tourism Day 2007, "Tourism opens doors for women." The UNWTO's Global Report on Women and Tourism in 2010 highlighted the explicit linkages between tourism and women, suggesting that tourism could contribute significantly to achieving gender equality and empowering women, aligned with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and later, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNWTO and UN Women, 2011; UNWTO, 2016a, 2016b). The UNWTO underscores the role of tourism as a means for women's empowerment and gender equality, emphasizing the potential of the industry to support women, particularly due to low entry barriers and flexible working hours (Chant, 1997; Gentry, 2007; Jeffrey, 2018; UNWTO UN Women, 2011). Recognizing the economic significance of ecotourism, especially in addressing women's lower social status, it is seen as a potential source of opportunities and supplementary income for women to support their families. The UNWTO's commitment to integrating gender perspectives in ecotourism aligns with its "Global Code of Ethics for Tourism," aiming to collaborate with the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) to enhance women's roles in ecotourism (UNWTO & UN Women, 2011).

In the context of the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary, identified as a poverty reduction instrument for one of the poorest countries globally, management recognizes the essential contribution of women to realizing this strategy. Alarcón and Cole (2019) emphasize the integration of a gender

perspective in ecotourism as crucial not only for poverty reduction but also for sustainable and responsible tourism practices. They argue that tourism models such as ecotourism cannot be truly sustainable without genuine and sustained incorporation of gender-based perspectives and women's empowerment in declarations, planning, management, and analysis related to tourism. Women's empowerment is viewed as a valuable tool to enhance welfare and human development. Empowering women positively impacts family prosperity and children's lives and contributes to national development. In Ghana, women play a substantial role in national development, and there is a recognized need to encourage and support their active participation in public life and governance (GSGDA, 2010). Women's empowerment is seen as fostering courage, knowledge, and skills, leading to better parenting and decision making. Moreover, it creates awareness, enables equal opportunities for women in leadership positions, and contributes to the national economy (Bushra & Wajiha, 2015). Recognizing the gendered nature of tourism industry jobs, in which certain roles are traditionally associated with women, women's empowerment through tourism is seen as a means to challenge and contest traditional gender roles. Authors, such as Kinnaird and Hall (1994) and Moswete and Lacey (2015), have highlighted the industry's tendency to gender certain positions, and tourism is acknowledged as an avenue for women to challenge societal norms, where men are often seen as primary economic contributors (Moswete & Lacey, 2015).

### *Barriers to women's involvement and empowerment in ecotourism development*

Empowerment is a product of collective social actions (Qunchao et al., 2019). However, global evidence from the literature and history underscores that, women, particularly those from marginalized groups, have borne the brunt of various adversities (Mandal, 2013). Instances of abuse, assault, poverty, malnutrition, and societal discrimination persist, with women in the 21st century still being subjected to violence, witchcraft accusations, and senseless brutality (Mandal, 2013). Societal processes perpetuate vulnerability, diminishing self-worth among women facing shame and discrimination, a narrative not foreign to Ghanaian women. Gender disparities persist in Ghana, prompting government efforts to bridge the gender gap and empower women on development agendas. Cultural factors, as highlighted by the UNDP (2016a), contribute to the limitations in women's involvement and equity across nations. Societal norms, family dynamics, and the prevailing preference for male children, particularly in Northern Ghana, reinforce women's inferior status. Overcoming these discriminatory practices and familial concerns necessitates collaborative efforts from all sectors of society, including traditional leaders and governmental and non-governmental organizations (Menhas et al., 2013). Barriers to women's empowerment extend to educational and economic domains. High illiteracy rates, lack of data

availability, and gender-biased norms restricting women's land ownership impede their involvement in society (UN Women, 2016). Economic empowerment faces challenges, such as limited job opportunities, inadequate skills, low-paid occupations, and sexual harassment. Ling et al. (2013) stress the need for rural women's inclusion in tourism business enterprises to enhance service delivery. Moreover, economic and political advancements have not uniformly benefited women, as cultural and political norms persist, constraining women to domestic roles and subjecting them to aggression (Buğra 2014; Cinar & Kose, 2018; Cinar & Ugur-Cinar, 2018). Ling et al. (2013) argued that enhancing rural women's empowerment within tourism is crucial for improving service delivery.

Based on the review, following research question were developed to guide the study:

- (1) *What are the areas and levels of women's involvement in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary Community Ecotourism Project?*
- (2) *What barriers hinder women's involvement in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary Community Ecotourism Project?*
- (3) *What are the areas and levels of empowerment women are receiving through their involvement in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary Community Ecotourism Project?*

### 3. Conceptual framework

In view of the literature review and the research questions, this study developed a basic framework comprising three (3) components covering women's involvement, barriers to their involvement, and women's empowerment. The conceptual framework depicted in Figure 1 demonstrates the relationship between women's involvement in ecotourism and empowerment, across various dimensions. Women's participation in ecotourism activities, such as tour guiding, entertaining tourists, providing security, engaging in communal labor, decision-making, and selling food, as well as hosting visitors, can act as catalysts for empowerment. This involvement influences women's empowerment across social, psychological, economic, and political domains, signifying the multifaceted impact of ecotourism on gender equality and empowerment (Alarcón & Cole, 2019; Jeffrey & Jeffrey 2018). However, the pathway from involvement to empowerment is moderated by barriers that can hinder women's participation, including language barriers, familial consensus, and cultural and gender roles. These barriers act as impediments to women's full engagement in ecotourism activities, thereby having the propensity affecting the extent to which ecotourism can serve as a vehicle for empowerment. With tourism enclaves, identifying, understanding, and addressing these barriers are essential for fostering women's meaningful participation in ecotourism and maximizing their potential to promote gender empowerment in ecotourism destinations.

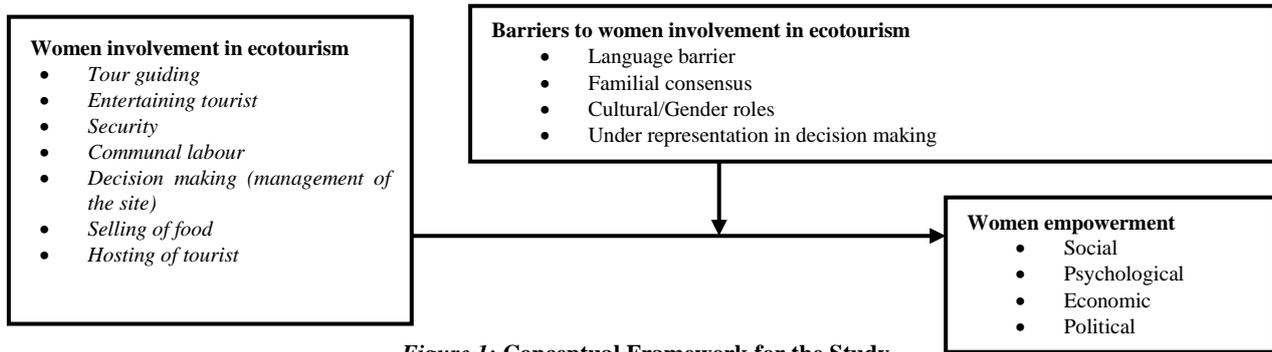


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for the Study

Source: Authors

### Study Setting

The study area is the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary. This area is located in the Wa West District of the Upper West Region of Ghana. The area is situated between longitudes of 40 °N and 245 °N and latitudes of 9 °W and 32 °W, with an area of approximately 5899.3 square kilometres. It shares boundaries with Sawla-Tuna-Kalba District to the south, Nadowli/Kaleo District to the northwest, and the Wa Municipal District to the east. The western part of the study area is located in Burkina Faso.

The sanctuary was created in 1999 by John Mason, Brian Keating, Alex Graham, and Donna Sheppard; a non-governmental organization called the Nature Conservation Research Centre (NCRC); the Calgary Zoological Society in Canada; and three local community chiefs of Wechiau-Naa, Gurungu-Naa, and Tokali-Naa. The Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary is surrounded by 17 communities with a population of approximately 10,268 people in 720 households (UNDP, 2012). The communities include Wechiau, which hosts both the Wa West District office and

sanctuary office. The other communities included Tuole, Kpanfa, Dornye, Tankara, Tokali, Doodle, Dochere, Donpire, Dogberipari, and Bulinche. Telewona, Peplinkpari, Tambligie, Nwaaleyiri, and Kantu. In this study, four (4) out of the seventeen (17) communities surrounding the sanctuary were sampled for the study based on the reason that they are the most visited communities by tourists (Kosoe & Osumanu, 2015; Peprah, 2018). The four communities are Wechiau, Kpanfaa, Toule and Telewona. The choice of the Wechiau Community Hippo Sanctuary (WCHS) as a study area is premised on the fact that it is one of the community-owned ecotourism initiatives in Ghana that has enjoyed much support from both Government and Non-Governmental Organizations (Kosoe & Osumanu, 2015). Based on the fundamental ideas underpinning the development of community-based ecotourism to empower local people, particularly vulnerable groups in the community, it is prudent to assess ecotourism and women’s involvement in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary.

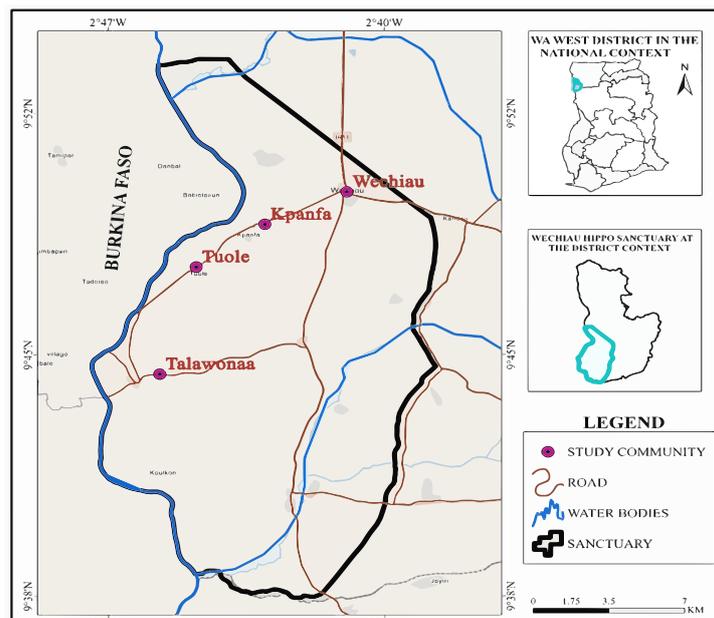


Figure 2: Map of the Wa West District showing the Wechiau Community Hippo Sanctuary.

Source: GIS, University of Cape Coast (2024)

#### 4. Methodology

This study aimed to assess the level of involvement and empowerment of women in ecotourism in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary Area. It seeks to understand the extent to which women engage in ecotourism activities by assessing their roles, decision-making influences, and economic contributions. Additionally, this study intends to explore the impact of ecotourism on women's empowerment, encompassing psychological, social, political, and economic dimensions, ultimately providing insights into enhancing gender-inclusive and sustainable ecotourism practices in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary Area. To achieve this, a mixed-method research design was adopted. This offers the opportunity to use both the qualitative and quantitative data collected for the same study objectives. The qualitative data provided detailed views of the participants, whereas quantitative data were collected from the scores of the instrument. Together, they provide a more nuanced perspective and insight into the phenomena/variables being studied (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Creswell, 2014).

##### *Instrument, sampling and data collection*

This study used two research instruments. These were semi-structured questionnaires and an in-depth interview (IDI) guide. The questionnaire for the study had three (3) main sections, with questions containing both close-ended and open-ended questions, based on the literature review. Section (a) focuses on the areas and barriers to women's involvement in ecotourism. It is made up of 12 questions asked such as: What role do you play in the ecotourism project? How satisfied are you with your level of involvement in tourism development in your community? Can you tell us about any challenges you face in the process of being involved in the hippo sanctuary development process? Section (b) Areas of empowerment of women through ecotourism development in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary. It contained 31 questions including: Would you say that women in this community have been empowered by an ecotourism project? If yes or no, tell us why? Section (c), is on the demographic characteristics of respondents, including age, marital status, educational level, nativity, and years of residence in the community. The IDI guide has 10 main questions. The variables in the research instruments were generated from literature, particularly those of Alarcon and Cole (2019), Arroyo et al. (2019), and Boley et al. (2016), Cinar and Kose (2018), Kulkarni (2017), Scheyvens and Scheyvens (2010) and Qunchao et al. (2019).

A census of all 194 households and 10 women's groups within the four communities was used for the study. Only one female from each household and two female leaders from each group were chosen to participate in the study. Using convenience sampling techniques, the questionnaires were self-administered to 162 women from 162 households out of the 194 in four main communities surrounding the sanctuary to gather quantitative data. This

was based on the respondents' availability, readiness, and the willingness to participate in the study informed consent was obtained. The IDI guide was used to conduct face-to-face interviews with the twenty (20) purposively selected female group leaders from the four communities. Interview responses were tape-recorded. All data were collected from women aged  $\geq 18$  years from the 1st to 15th March 2020. This was because the Ghana Statistical Service (2010) avers that persons aged 18 years and above are considered adults and mature and, as such, can make their own decisions without much influence. Moreover, only respondents who had stayed in the study area for at least one year were included in the study. This is because they are better able to appreciate the Hippo Sanctuary, the women's involvement, and empowerment issues.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, a pre-test of the research instruments was carried out in the Tokale and Kantu communities from January 31, 2020, to 1 February 1, 2020. Pre-testing of the instruments helped to determine the suitability and content validity of the study. In addition, in the actual fieldwork, particularly with the interviews, the responses provided by the interviewees were repeated by the interviewer to the interviewees to confirm or modify their responses. This helped ensure that the interviewees understood the issues very well, and that their responses were not misrepresented.

##### *Data analysis*

The study employed IBM Statistics (SPSS) version 25 was used to analyze the quantitative data, and the outcomes were presented using frequencies and percentages. Qualitative data (interviews) were analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis method. The recorded interviews were transcribed (verbatim) for analysis. The information gathered from the transcription was categorized under common themes of similarity, and conclusions were drawn based on these similarities.

#### 5. Findings

##### *Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents*

The sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents were gathered. The results show that in terms of age, most of the respondents were aged between 18-29 years (37.7%) (Table 1). This was followed by those within the age range of 30-39 years (30.9%) 40-49 years (20.4%) and 50-59 years (8.6%). Only four respondents representing 2.5% were older than 60 years. The marital status of the respondents was another area of interest in this study because it has been found to influence women's empowerment and socioeconomic development (Saatchi & Akpinar, 2007). The study also revealed that 53.7% of the respondents were married. The remaining 42.7% were without partners and out of this, 34.0% had never been married, 6.2% were widows, 28% were divorcees and 1.2% were separated from their partners (Table 1).

**Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents**

Socio-Demographic Characteristics	N	Percent (%)
Age (years)		
18-29	61	37.7
30-39	50	30.9
40-49	33	20.4
50-59	14	8.6
60+	4	2.4
Marital status		
married	87	53.7
Single	55	34.0
widowed	10	6.2
divorced	8	4.9
separated	2	1.2
Highest educational level attained		
No formal education	50	30.9
SHS/Vocational	46	28.4
JHS/MSLC	31	19.1
Polytechnic/University	21	13.0
Primary education	14	8.6
Native status		
Indigene	151	93.2
Non-indigene	11	6.8
Length of stay (years)		
21-30	52	32.1
11-20	42	25.9
31-40	34	21.0
1-10	18	11.1
41 ≥	16	9.9

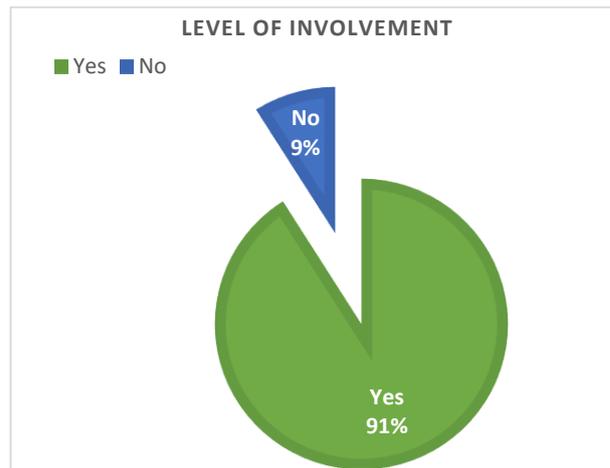
Source: Authors

Education is one of the most significant avenues for empowering women with the information, knowledge, skills, and self-confidence necessary to complete the developmental process (UNESCO, 2005). Although education is usually considered an important component of social empowerment, it also strongly influences economic and psychological power as well (Moswete & Lacey, 2015). Evidence from the field suggests that the majority (69.1%) of the respondents had received some form of formal education, be it primary, JHS/MSLC, SHS/vocational, or tertiary, whereas approximately 30.9% had no formal education. Among those with some formal education, 28.4 % had attained a Senior High School/Vocational/Technical certificate, 19.1% had completed a Junior High School/Middle School Leaving Certificate (JHS/MSLC), 13.0 % of the respondents had tertiary education, and 8.6% of the respondents had primary education (Table 1). The results also revealed that the level of education of the respondent was likely to impact women’s ability to take up roles and identify opportunities to become empowered. This is because women who are more educated are empowered (UN Women 2016). Women’s participation in decision-making increases (Nayak & Mahanta, 2009). This is because education presumably provides women with more opportunities to work outside their homes, puts money into their hands, and fosters greater bargaining power in the household (Nussbaum, 2003). Again, it came to the fore in this study that 93.2% of the respondents were indigenous to the communities within the sanctuary catchment areas. The remaining (6.8%), however, represented non-indigenes. Regarding the length of stay of respondents in

the study area, highest group of respondents representing 32.1%) lived there between 21-30 years in their communities, 30.9% lived there between 41 years and above, 25.9% lived between 11- 20 years, and 11.1% of respondents had stayed between 1-10 years (Table 1). This shows that the respondents are well aware of the operations of the Sanctuary and can, therefore, provide detailed information on women’s involvement and empowerment through the Ecotourism Project.

**Level and areas of women’s involvement in ecotourism in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary**

This study used data gathered on women’s involvement in ecotourism development in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary. The results gathered (as shown in Figure 3) show that 91% of women (respondents) were involved in ecotourism in the Sanctuary, while a little than 9 % were at all not involved. The high percentage of respondents’ involvement in the ecotourism development process could be attributed to the fact that the sanctuary is a community-based ecotourism project and many hands are needed to make it function as it should.



**Figure 3: Involvement of Women in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary**

Source: Authors

The study further explored the areas of women involved in ecotourism projects, and the results are displayed in Table 2. The study found that out of the 91% involved in ecotourism development in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary area, 29.4% abided by the laws of the sanctuary to ensure that, although women in local communities have strong connection to the land and its resources, their participation in the ecotourism project while adhering to these laws helps ensure that tourism and its related activities among these do not harm the environment or jeopardize the long-term viability of the sanctuary as a tourism destination and livelihood option. Also, 24.6% of them were involved through partaking in communal labor involving the sanctuary, 15.5% were for selling goods to the tourists, whereas provision of entertainment to the tourists (8.8 inviting distant friends to visit the site (7.7%), hosting of tourists in homestay facilities (4.5%), provision of security

to tourists/visitors (4.1%), providing tour guide services (2.7%), and 2.7% were involved in the day-to-day management of the site (Table 2). This shows that the management of sanctuaries is dominated by men, whereas women are more involved in the provision of support services for sanctuaries and visitors.

**Table 2: Areas of women’s involvement in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary**

Areas	N	Percent (%)
I abide by the by-laws of the sanctuary	110	29.4
Engage in communal labour	92	24.6
I sell goods to tourists/visitors	58	15.5
I provide entertainment (cultural dance) to tourists/visitors	33	8.8
I invite encourage friends and families to visit the site	29	7.7
I host tourists/visitors in my home	17	4.5
I provide security to tourists/visitors	15	4.1
I provide tour guide services	10	2.7
I am involved in managing the attraction	10	2.7
Total	374	100

Source: Authors Note: Frequency involved multiple responses

On the contrary, some respondents (the remaining 9%) refuted their involvement in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary development process for reasons such as; “they do not obtain any benefit from the sanctuary”, as well as “there are too many rules and regulations governing the operation of the sanctuary” as expressed in the ensuing narratives:

This is agreed to by a respondent in an interview, who stated that:

*“I do not get anything from this sanctuary. I live in this community and see people (tourists) come and go to the riverside, but they do not give us anything. Meanwhile, the sanctuary people (management) and the chief do not even allow us (the women) to fetch firewood from the sanctuary which we can sell to make money” (a 34-year-old married woman).*

### **Barriers to women’s involvement in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary ecotourism project**

The study further sought to identify barriers that could either entirely or partly prevent or limit women’s involvement in ecotourism projects in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary. The results in Table 3 show that about 44% were kept out due to restrictions and gender roles in some work areas, such as tour guiding, while 32% of the respondents indicated that men dominate during ecotourism meetings. Also, 24% of the women were kept out because of language barriers (Table 3). This male dominance limits women’s voices and choices in decision-making involving Sanctuary affairs. As noted earlier, this is because only a few women were involved in the management of ecotourism projects.

**Table 3: Barriers to women’s involvement in ecotourism development**

Barriers of involvement	N	Percent (%)
We are not allowed and not allowed to be involved in tour guiding (gender-biased restrictions)	22	44.0
Men dominate in the project and meetings	16	32.0
Language barrier	12	24.0
Average Score	50	100.0

Source: Authors

The comment from one respondent during the IDI further buttressed the finding that women were not allowed to engage in tour guidance.

*“We the women in this community are not involved in taking tourists (tour guiding) to the river despite the fact this community is not far from the river. You see the river is just close by here (pointing to the river) but I always sit here and see tourists with other men from Wechiau going to the river. I do not know why they (sanctuary management) do not involve we the women in taking visitors to the river, maybe the men think we the women cannot paddle the canoe or swim” (A 39-year-old women’s group executive).*

Another participant also indicated that many rules and regulations do not favor women in terms of their involvement in ecotourism projects.

*“There are too many rules and regulations here in the sanctuary. I do not want to be involved in any work here because I do not have my freedom to do what I want to do here” (A 25-year-old woman).*

A third respondent from the IDI also expressed that, due to familial concerns, she was not involved:

*“As for me, my husband does not allow me to come in contact with the tourists. He always says this work is not for women. So in this community, if you want any tourism, the men are the majority who engage in it” (A 29-year-old married group leader).*

### **Women empowerment through Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary ecotourism project**

The study explored various ways in which the ecotourism project helped empower women in the communities surrounding the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary. This study explored this from the four dimensions of empowerment: psychological, social, political, and economic.

#### **Psychological empowerment**

In examining the way which the sanctuary empowered women psychologically, the results revealed that, on average, the Hippo sanctuary empowers 83.8% of women psychologically (Table 4). Specifically, it makes 91.4% felt special because people travelled to see the community’s unique features. 90.7% of respondents indicated that the Hippo Sanctuary reminds them that they have a unique resource and culture to share with visitors, while 80.9% of them indicated that it makes them feel proud to be residents

of the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary area and would want to tell others about what the sanctuary has to offer to the tourist. It was also observed that the Sanctuary gave 75.3% of the women a sense of ownership and willingness to protect it (Table 4).

**Table 4: Perceived psychological empowerment**

Ecotourism in Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary	Yes (%)	No (%)
It makes me feel special because people travel to see my community's unique features.	148(91.4)	14 (8.6)
It reminds me that I have a unique culture to share with visitors	147(90.7)	15(9.3)
It makes me proud to be a resident of the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary area.	131(80.9)	31(19.1)
It makes me want to tell others about what we have to offer at Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary	131(80.9)	31(19.1)
It makes me want to work to keep Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary special	122(75.3)	40(24.7)
<i>Average Score</i>	83.8	16.2

Source: Authors

Some responses from the IDI session also corroborated the earlier results on the pride that the sanctuary brought to women in communities:

*We the women in this community are happy about the tourism here. In fact, if not because of the hippo sanctuary I don't think we will be getting a lot of people visiting us especially the white people (international tourist). The hippo sanctuary has made this our community popular particularly our dance "bene" and we are very proud of that. Tourist like to see us dance our cultural dance (A 45-year-old group leader).*

**Social empowerment**

In the assessment of the performance of the ecotourism projects in the area of social empowerment, an average of 72.4% of the women felt empowered (Table 5). Precisely, approximately 82.1% indicated that it makes them become involved in their community development process; close to seventy per cent (68.5%) of them also indicated that it makes them feel more connected to their communities, whereas over two-thirds (66.7%) also reported that the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary fosters a sense of community spirit among them (Table 5).

**Table 5: Social empowerment**

Social empowerment	Yes (%)	No (%)
Ecotourism at Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary provides a way for me to get involved in my community development process	133 (82.1)	29 (17.9)
My involvement in the ecotourism at Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary makes me feel more connected to my community/others	111 (68.5)	51 (31.5)
My involvement in the ecotourism at Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary fosters a sense of community spirit within me	108 (66.7)	54 (33.3)
<i>Average Score</i>	72.4	27.57

Source: Authors

The findings in Table 5 are supported by another respondent in the IDI, who commented:

*Because of the tourism people come here to see our dance and culture. So as for me, I am very happy about tourism. We have dance groups in our community and when the tourists come and want us to perform for them the manager will call us. We entertain the tourists and they pay us and we are happy. (A 29-year-old married woman).*

**Political empowerment**

The results show that concerning political empowerment, an average of two-thirds (58.2%) of the respondents do not

feel empowered. Specifically, approximately sixty per cent (57.4%) of the women felt that they did not have a voice in the Hippo sanctuary decision-making process. Also, 63.6% of them indicated that they were not involved in the decision-making process when it came to the Hippo sanctuary, while 58.0% of the respondents were of the view that their opinions did not bring any difference to issues concerning the sanctuary development. About 53.7% of them feel that they did not feel the project provided an opportunity to be heard about matters concerning tourism development in the Wechiau area.

**Table 6: Perceived political empowerment**

Political empowerment	Yes (%)	No (%)
I feel like I have an outlet to share my concerns about tourism development in Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary	75 (46.3)	87 (53.7)
I feel like I have a voice in Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary ecotourism development decisions	69 (42.6)	93 (57.4)
I feel like my vote makes a difference in how ecotourism is developed in Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary	68 (42.0)	94 (58.2)
I feel like I have access to the decision-making process when it comes to ecotourism in Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary	59 (36.4)	103 (63.6)
<i>Average Score</i>	41.8	58.2

Source: Authors Note: Frequency involved multiple responses

This was further supported by a participant in the IDI, who lamented their underrepresentation and lack of voice during meetings.

*As for the decision-making process, we the women are not always many during meetings. It is only the representatives of the communities surrounding the sanctuary that attend the meetings at Wechiau. Most of these representatives are men.*

*There are meetings at the community level too but the men are always the majority. Some of the men don't allow their wives to attend the meetings because they (men) always say that the women should stay in the house so they (men) will attend. (A 35-year-old group leader).*

## Economic empowerment

In terms of economic empowerment, the results indicate that women feel empowered economically because of the availability of the Hippo Sanctuary. The study further reveals that the project also created opportunities for women to access capital. The existence of the Hippo Sanctuary brought about the formation of women groups who engaged in other economic activities, so some respondents were able to acquire loans from financial institutions to improve their businesses. Others engaged in protecting the environment through moringa cultivation. The cultivation of moringa became necessary because of the ban on farming within the sanctuary; therefore, women were taught and encouraged to cultivate moringa trees to enhance the protection of the sanctuary and as a source of income for their families. Women sell moringa seeds to a local company (the Moringa Connect) in Wechiau. These were expressed through the IDI by the participants.

*This hippo sanctuary has given us women a lot of opportunities. We have several women groups in this community who are engaged in various economic activities like sea butter processing, beekeeping, and moringa cultivation. Some people (NGOs and financial institutions) sometimes come to give us loans too (A 30-year married woman, a group leader).*

Furthermore, the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary ecotourism project also provides some opportunities including the learning of pito brewing, petty trading, shea butter processing, beekeeping, moringa cultivation etc as an alternative source of livelihood instead of the over-reliance on charcoal burning and other farming activities that destroyed the sanctuary. For instance, women were taught shea butter processing (see Fig 3 and 4 on shea butter processing in Wechiau). They were also provided with a grinding mill to aid shea butter processing. This activity serves as an alternative means of livelihood for the women. One respondent expressed that the project empowered them economically by voicing the following:

*Through the hippo sanctuary, we are taught and provided with grinding mills which we use in the shea butter processing. This has provided us with income from the shea butter we sell. We used the money to support our families. (A 30-year married woman, a group leader).*



**Figure 3: Shea Butter Processing Women Groups**

Source: Authors



**Figure 4: Some Processed Shea Butter from the Women's Group**

Source: Authors

## 6. Discussion

This study reveals that women's involvement in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary Ecotourism Project is notably high (91.0%), reflecting the project's communal nature. While women actively participate in supporting roles such as abiding by sanctuary laws, communal labor, goods selling, entertainment, and hosting, they have minimal engagement in crucial aspects, such as project management and decision-making. This signals a gender disparity, indicating that men predominantly oversee the sanctuary's critical areas, whereas women are primarily relegated to supportive roles. Barriers to women's participation, like restrictions on tour guiding (44.0%) and perceived male dominance in decision-making (32.0%), underscore the need to address gender imbalances in key facets of the ecotourism projects. These results reinforce the conclusion that gender-biased norms restrict women's involvement, role performance, and leadership in society (UN Women, 2016) which continuously engenders gender disparities in Ghana, particularly in Northern Ghana. The study also identified the language barrier that affects meeting discussions, as women from some communities cannot speak the dominant language in which meeting discussions are held.

In the area of women's empowerment through the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary Ecotourism Project, the responses women feel psychologically empowered (83.8%) by the development and existence of the sanctuary, as it gives pride and makes them feel special for having visitors from all walks of life to come and see, witness, and enjoy the sanctuary and their culture as a person. Hence, they desire to talk more about ecotourism and are willing to protect and ensure that ecotourism projects remain active in the future. These results and the expressions of the women show that the project was beneficial in this empowerment dimension. These results indicate a reduction in any form of hostility among residents towards tourists and the sanctuary (Arroyo, et al., 2019; Francina, 2013). This further provides a sense of sustainable future for the Sanctuary, usually because a high sense of psychological empowerment through community-based ecotourism development is always associated with longevity and

success. Women felt socially empowered (72.3%). This is through their involvement and connection with others, which fosters the spirit of community and oneness, and offers the platform to be involved in the development of their communities, as revealed by the results. This is made possible by the project through the platform it offers for women to undertake social activities in groups such as cultural dance groups for the provision of entertainment for tourists, which are other opportunities for women to be empowered. This finding confirms Irandu and Shah's (2016) argument that social empowerment is often achieved and enhanced by ecotourism activities. The results further suggest that social empowerment emphasizes social cohesion and collaboration, which are essential requirements for community development (Boley et al., 2018).

The study also showed that the project empowers women economically by providing skill development (shea butter making, beekeeping, moringa cultivation, etc.) and offering a platform for easy access to loans for entrepreneurial activities. These opportunities offered through the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary project help women undertake economic activities that provide benefits, empower them financially, and make them more supportive of taking care of their homes and basic life needs. This could bring stability to their homes and provide a sense of fulfilment to them (Irandu & Shah, 2016). Besides, providing them with skill development helps build the capacity of women to start and manage their ecotourism-related businesses, such as shea butter making, moringa cultivation, pito brewing, and beef harvesting businesses in the sanctuary area. Such skill development offers opportunities to empower women to take control of their economic destinies in these communities through the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary ecotourism project (OECD, 2010; Scheyvens & Scheyvens, 2010). Moreover, empowering this way can help foster these women's resolve to champion the adoption of eco-friendly tourism practices and conservation efforts, such as protecting the shea tree and sanctuary from destruction because they benefit from these economic trees (the shea tree). This in turn contributes to the long-term sustainability of ecosystems and preservation of biodiversity. These outcomes inherently fit into the objectives of the development of the project, as noted in this study, that such economic activities were initiated by the chiefs with technical and financial support from the Nature Conservation Research Centre (NCRC) and the Calgary Zoological Centre (Canada) as measures to protect the sanctuary from destruction by locals (Sheppard et al., 2010).

On the other hand, the majority of the women (58.2%) did not feel empowered politically, largely due to the fact there is a lack of women's voice in decision-making and determination of the way the ecotourism development should go and, in most cases, they do not feel that they get

the platform to share their thoughts. This is largely attributable to male dominance and limited involvement of women in the management of ecotourism projects, which makes these women feel intimidated and unable to voice their opinions on management decisions. Thus, male dominance harms women's political empowerment through the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary ecotourism project. This dominance and limited political empowerment of women validates the assertions of Moswete and Lacey (2015), underscoring the prevalent restriction of women's voices and contributions to the decision-making processes associated with development. However, the decreased participation of women in the sanctuary's decision-making framework can be attributed to the exclusive initiation of the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary development endeavor by male figures, specifically the chiefs, sidelining women from their inception (UNDP, 2012). This aligns with the observations of Irandu and Shah (2016), who emphasize the historical oversight of women's perspectives in previous development initiatives. These oversights occurred as development stakeholders, including consultants, researchers, and government officials, who predominantly sought the viewpoints of male figures, such as chiefs, local elites, and entrepreneurs, thereby sidelining the voices of women in the decision-making process. However, the absence of empowered voices may contribute to the perpetuation of gender disparities and hinder efforts to create a supportive and inclusive environment for women working in or benefiting from ecotourism projects (Kulkarni, 2017; Qunchao et al., 2019). Moreover, when women are not politically empowered in ecotourism rural-based projects, the community and projects may miss out on the diverse skills, perspectives, and leadership qualities that women can bring to the table for project sustainability.

## **7. Conclusion and Recommendation**

This study aimed to assess the involvement and empowerment of women in ecotourism in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary Area. The findings revealed that within the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary ecotourism project, women are more involved in the provision of support services to tourists but are least involved in the management and decision-making concerning the Sanctuary. Women faced barriers, such as restrictions to only supporting roles in the project, male dominance in the management of projects that did not favor women, as well as language barriers during meetings. The findings further reveal the multifaceted impact of the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary project on women, both economically and politically. Economically, the project proved to be a catalyst for women's empowerment by providing them with skills in shea butter making, beekeeping, moringa cultivation, and access to loans for entrepreneurial endeavors. This economic empowerment not only enhances the financial autonomy of women, but also equips them to meaningfully contribute to their households and communities. The acquisition of skills enables women to initiate and manage

ecotourism-related businesses, fostering entrepreneurship and self-reliance. However, the study also sheds light on a significant political disparity, with the majority of women feeling disempowered because of limited participation in decision-making processes. The historical oversight of women's perspectives on project's initiation, dominated by male figures, perpetuates gender disparities and hampers the creation of an inclusive environment. The absence of politically empowered voices not only deprives the project of diverse skills and perspectives but also undermines its long-term sustainability by neglecting the potential contributions of women to the decision-making framework. Efforts to rectify this gender imbalance are crucial for ensuring the holistic success and sustainability of ecotourism projects such as the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary.

Based on the main findings and conclusions drawn from the study, the following recommendations were made for improving women's involvement in the Wechiau Community Hippo Sanctuary Area. First, the Management Board or the Governing Board of the Sanctuary should provide equal representation for women at meetings concerning the sanctuary. This can be achieved by allocating a percentage of management meetings to women. This enables the (women) to become more involved in sanctuary management. Empowering women will aid them in having equal participation and representation at all levels of the decision-making process and in public life in each community and society, which will enable them to articulate their concerns about development issues in the community. Second, the Management of the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary should tackle the challenges confronting the example of women, recruiting and training women as tour guides within the Hippo sanctuary, and training or employing the service of an interpreter during meetings to interpret the proceedings of the meetings so that they can understand. This will enhance their involvement in the development of the Hippo sanctuary as well as their social empowerment. It must be stressed that these interventions require intentional efforts to create an inclusive and gender-responsive environment, ensuring that women have the opportunity to actively participate in decision-making processes and contribute to the overall success and sustainability of the project. Finally, Given the limited number of studies on ecotourism and women's involvement in Ghana, this study recommends that more studies be conducted in other ecotourism destinations to assess how ecotourism empowers women. This will provide more empirical data for ecotourism developers and environmental conservation agencies to be gender-sensitive in their policies. Future research should focus on women's empowerment and its effect on ecotourism. This can help enhance our understanding of gender roles in ecotourism.

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**INFO PAGE**

**Empowering women through ecotourism: A case study of women's involvement in the Wachau hippo sanctuary project in Ghana**

**Abstract**

Community-based ecotourism has been promoted globally as a sustainable development model that can improve the well-being of women through income-generating opportunities, by raising gender awareness and empowering women. This study aimed to assess the involvement and empowerment of women in ecotourism in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary Area. A concurrent mixed-method design was employed to gather data from 182 respondents comprising 162 women from individual households and 20 women's group executives within four selected communities around the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary, Ghana. A qualitative descriptive analysis method and the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) using frequencies and percentages were employed in the analysis of the data. The study found that women's involvement in ecotourism development in the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary area took two forms; the provision of support services for tourists/the sanctuary and the management of the sanctuary. The study revealed that women feel empowered psychologically, socially and economically but not politically. The study recommends that project stakeholders must undertake intentional efforts to create an inclusive and gender-responsive environment (such as allocating a percentage of the representation of the management meetings to women, recruiting and training women as tour guides within the sanctuary) ensuring that women have the opportunity to actively participate in decision-making processes (by training or employing the services of an interpreter during meetings to interpret the proceedings of the meetings to all to understand) to help women contribute to the overall success and sustainability of the Hippo Sanctuary.

**Keywords:** Ecotourism, Sustainable tourism, Women empowerment, Women involvement, Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary.

**Authors**

Full Name	Author contribution roles	Contribution rate
Moses Kukpieng Mwinnoure:	Conceptualism, Software, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft, Visualization	50%
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**This paper does not required ethics committee report**

**Justification:** The methodology of this study does not require an ethics committee report.