

## Tourism as a Driver for Promoting Gender Equality? A Case Study of Participation of Women in the Tourism Labour Market in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

 Thomas GOMES<sup>1\*</sup>

 Adam BLAKE<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Bangladesh has the highest overall ranking in Asia for gender equality (World Economic Forum 2017). The tourism industry is frequently promoted as a global driver for the economic empowerment of women (UNWTO 2010). The aim of this research is to examine if a gender gap exists in the domestic tourism industry in Cox's Bazaar. Bangladesh has a large domestic tourism sector centered on the Cox's Bazar district. This paper analyses labour market participation by female residents of Cox's Bazar in the (i) hotel and (ii) restaurant sectors. A mixed methodology approach is employed. Quantitative techniques are used to analyse gender differentials in labour market participation. A qualitative approach using interviews is used to identify factors contributing to the gender gap. The results of the research indicate low levels of representation by women in workforce in the hotel and restaurants sector. The research indicates that the key causes of this gender gap are social norms, the concept of gendered spaces, harassment in the workplace and lack of access to training opportunities. This research aims to contribute to knowledge relating to the gender dimension of tourism and specifically the relationship between the tourism industry participations and gender equality in Bangladesh

**Key Words:** Tourism Cox's Bazar, Gender Inequality, Female Economic Empowerment.

**Jel Code/Kodu:** L83

**Referans/Citation:** Gomes, T. & Blake, A. (2020). Tourism as a Driver for Promoting Gender Equality? A Case Study of Participation of Women in the Tourism Labour Market in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Issues*, Vol. 2, No.2, 178-189.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the 2017 World Economic Forum Report on Gender Gap, Bangladesh was ranked first in gender equality in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) above larger economies including India and China (WEF, 2017) The aim of this paper is to examine to what extent there is a gender gap in the tourism industry in Bangladesh's most popular domestic tourism destination – Cox's Bazar. The tourism industry is often promoted as an example of an industry which provides opportunity for women (Ashley & Goodwin, 2007; UNWTO 2010) and contributes to poverty alleviation. This research sets out to examine gender equality in terms of labour market participation in the domestic tourism industry focusing on (i) the hotel sector, (ii) the restaurant sector.

The paper begins by providing a review of literature examining the relationship between tourism, gender and poverty in less developed countries (LDCs). There is also a review of literature relating to gender disparity in Bangladeshi society at the wider political and economic level. A brief review of literature

<sup>1</sup> PhD Researcher, MBA, MSc, Bournemouth University, United Kingdom, thomas.gomes@acsenda.com, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4229-8840, \* Corresponding Author.

<sup>2</sup> Professor of Economics in the Department of Tourism and Hospitality, Bournemouth University, ablake@bournemouth.ac.uk

relating to the socio cultural barriers impacting female labour market participation in Bangladesh is also presented. The second part of the paper presents primary research analysing gender based labour market participation differentials in the hotel and restaurant sector. Finally the research identifies some of the factors which contribute to gender differentials in the tourism industry in Cox's Bazar.

It is often assumed that women in developing countries are the direct beneficiaries of the tourism industry, however such assumptions require detailed analysis of the functioning of the tourism sector and the extent to which women are included, excluded, or stratified within the industry (Staritz & Reis, 2013). The research outlined in this paper aims to contribute to knowledge relating to the gender dimension of tourism and the relationship between the tourism industry and gender equality in Bangladesh. This contribution incorporates a critical analysis of the assumption that the tourist industry economically empowers women through the provision of labour market opportunities. This research contributes to knowledge of the tourism industry in Bangladesh by incorporating a gender dimension into the analysis of the potential for the tourism industry to contribute to poverty reduction. The contribution of this research is to examine the issue of female labour market participation in the tourism industry in Bangladesh in the context of the pro-poor tourism agenda and achievement of Millennium Development Goal 3-promote gender equality and empower women.

## **2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. Tourism, poverty, and gender nexus**

Tourism is a multifaceted concept which has social, economic, cultural and environmental aspects (Lew et al., 2004). Tourism is increasingly perceived as a generator of economic growth for developing economies and as a means of alleviating poverty (Buckley, 1996) and as such has been incorporated into development strategies for developing countries by governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Consequently, tourism marketing and planning are not only seen in terms of commercial potential but also as important elements of societal planning and development (Sautter & Leisen, 1999; Ashley, 2003). There has been extensive research into the relationship between tourism and poverty alleviation in developing countries. (Hall, 2000; Ashley, 2003; Jamieson et al., 2004; Harrison, 2007; Meyer, 2007; Blake, 2008; Mitchell & Ashley, 2009; Scheyvens, 2011; Islam & Carlsen, 2012; Croes, 2014; Venegas et al., 2015). Jamieson, Goodwin & Edmunds (2004) indicate that the development of the tourism sector in many developing countries is prioritized because of its potential for generating employment due to its labour-intensive nature. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2005) explicitly state that tourism is 'often the only sustainable growth sector' for poor countries. The UNWTO (2010) specifies the positive impact of tourism on poverty and the opportunities it provides for economic empowerment of women. It cites the labour-intensive nature of tourism which facilitates participation by poor people in the workforce. Many of the jobs require relatively low-level skills and education and are part-time in nature which means they can complement other livelihoods. However, Staritz & Reis (2013) argue that the very reasons put forward for tourism as a pro- female industry serve to underline the constraints placed on women in the industry. Employment in tourism work is seasonal, often based on traditional household tasks, and requires flexible work patterns. As a result, women are often limited to casual employment with low levels of job security and chances for promotion.

It is argued (Santos & Varejão, 2007; Campos-Soria et al., 2011; Rinaldi & Salerno, 2019) that analysis of gender participation in tourism in developing countries must incorporate analysis of both horizontal and vertical gender segregation of the labour market. Horizontally women and men are frequently employed in different occupations. Research (Muñoz-Bullon, 2009; Boone et al., 2013; Rinaldi &

Salerno, 2019) indicates that vertical segregation results in gender pyramids where women are frequently employed at the base while men occupy management roles. The result is that women are overrepresented in job roles which are poorly paid, part –time, insecure and offer very limited opportunities for career progression.

There has been a diverse range of research focusing on the gender dimensions of tourism studies (Gibson, 2001; Morgan et al., 2007; Scheyvens, 2007; Swain & Hall, 2007; Ferguson, 2009) Specifically, the interrelationship between gender, tourism and poverty reduction has been the subject of increased focus (Gentry, 2007; Vandegrift, 2008; Schellhorn, 2010; Ferguson, 2010a; 2011; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012; Ferguson & Alarcon, 2015; Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015; Bidegain Ponte, 2017; Moreno & Canada, 2018).

UNWTO initiated the Sustainable Tourism for Eliminating Poverty programme (STEP) as development of the Pro-poor Tourism Partnership (Zhao, 2008). ST-EP's goal was to promote sustainable tourism as a means of alleviating poverty and promoting development in poor countries. However, the gender dimension of tourism and poverty reduction is limited, and gender equality objectives have never been an explicit component of the STEP programme. Ferguson (2011) and Staritz & Reis (2013) note that claims that the tourism industry promotes women's economic empowerment requires further evidence. Moreno & Canada (2018) examine the relationship between the tourism sector and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through the prism of gender and posit the argument that without addressing gender equality, the potential of tourism to contribute to Agenda 2030 will be significantly hindered.

The concept of pro-poor tourism has been promoted by some academics (Ashley et al., 2001) and agencies in the international development community since the late 1990s. The rise of the pro-poor tourism movement argue that the development of the tourist industry is congruent with the concept of pro-poor growth because tourism tends to be labour intensive and it frequently provides opportunities for women's participation in the labour market. However, critics of the pro poor tourism concept claim that it is essentially a neo-liberal concept and that it does little to challenge systemic inequalities (Scheyvens, 2007). An example cited of this failure is that a link between tourism as a catalyst for poverty alleviation and the need to address gender gaps in the industry is not explicit in literature promoting pro poor tourism. (Ferguson, 2011) notes that gender equality or bridging the gap in pay and conditions has never been a direct goal of pro-poor tourism.

## **2.2. Gender disparity in Bangladeshi society**

To examine the status and participation of women in the domestic tourism industry in Bangladesh, it is useful to firstly focus on gender issues in the wider context of the Bangladeshi economy and society. Bangladesh has been hailed as an exemplar in addressing gender disparities and has been at the forefront among the least-developed countries. Bangladesh is ranked top amongst south Asian nations for gender equality by the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2017). However, an analysis of the statistics underpinning the 2017 Report on Gender Gap indicates a more complex situation. One of the key factors contributing to the high ranking for gender equality is the political participation by women. Bangladesh has the eighth lowest gender gap in political empowerment in the world. The country has had a female head of state for longer than any other country in the world and 20 per cent of parliamentary seats are held by women. Kabeer et al. (2013) note that improvements in addressing the gender gap in politics has resulted in significant change in socio-cultural attitudes towards the status of women. An important

example cited is the decline in Bangladesh of gender-based infanticide – the so-called missing women phenomenon which is prevalent in some South Asian countries.

However, a reduction in the gender gap in the political class does not necessarily mean there is equality for women, especially poor women in the wider workplace. Kapsos (2008) and Ahmed & Maitra (2010) found that overall women's earnings were between 15 and 20 per cent lower than men. The gender gap in wages is higher in urban areas compared to rural areas although wages in urban areas are higher. There has been a significant rise in female labour market participation market in Bangladesh in the past two decades. However, a closer analysis of the statistics demonstrates that this has to a large extent been driven by the growth of the export led garment industry in major cities. Economic growth in Bangladesh has increased steadily since 2000 driven largely by the growth in the garment industry. Bangladesh is the world's second largest exporter of readymade garments after China. The growth of the garment industry has resulted in higher levels of female participation in the workforce and over 80% of workers in the garment industry are female (Machiavello et al., 2015). Islam (2012) notes that female employment is over dependent on one industrial sector and that in this sector there are there are gender disparities in wages and working conditions. Equal pay for equal work is enshrined in employment law and employers are required to provide 16 weeks of paid maternity leave as specified by the 2006 Labour Law. However, in practice there is evidence of significant disparity between wages and working conditions for men and women in a range of industries. The 2010 Household Income and Expenditure Survey cited by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). ADB indicates that overall female wages were 84per cent of male wages and for workers with monthly salaries the figure for women's wages was 54 percent of men's wages (ADB, 2016). Research highlights a link between education levels and the gender wage gap with the largest gaps observed among illiterate workers and the second largest gap is observed among literate workers with less than a primary school education (Kalam & Al Amin, 2016).

### **2.3. Socio cultural barriers to female participation in the Bangladeshi labour market**

There is a range of literature relating to the relationship between traditional attitudes and social norms and gender-based constraints on female participation in the labour market in Bangladesh geographically and culturally Bangladesh may be located in what is referred to in gender studies literatures as the 'patriarchal belt' (Caldwell, 1982; Kandiyoti, 1988: 1991). Despite significant progress in facilitating access to education for girls Bangladesh is considered a patriarchal society (Littrell & Bertsc, 2013). Local cultural norms reinforced by religious tradition largely limit the role of women to the domestic sphere (Kabeer, 2011). Consequently, many women are prevented from accessing employment and are forced to be dependent on male family members for financial support (Bridges et al., 2011). The predominant patriarchal social structure often means that when women access the labour market, this access is influenced by male family members (Kabeer, 2001). Research (Salway et al., 2005; Kabeer et al., 2011) indicates that restrictions on women 'ability to travel included the need for spousal permission and the fear of harassment Embedded ideas relating to gender norms (Salway et al., 2007) and gendered economic spheres (Islam, 2012) also contribute to gender gap in many sectors of the economy.

Staritz & Reis (2013) argue that in the tourism industry, gender is an identity category that intersects with other identities. The experiences of one group of women may be very different from another based on ethnic, cultural or faith identities. The constraints on women working in the tourism sector may differ when they intersect with ethnic or racial identities (Wood, 1997). Indigenous and tribal people's number only around 1 per cent of the total population in Bangladesh and these communities face multiple deprivation and discrimination. Members of indigenous communities frequently belong to linguistic minorities which can have a detrimental impact on employment and education opportunities. The ILO

note that is proportionately high mortality rates, low literacy rates and high levels of poverty impact women from indigenous communities in Bangladesh (Fredlund, 2007).

The greater Chittagong region in general and Cox's Bazar area in particular contain a significant number of indigenous communities. Indigenous culture has been officially recognized as a tourist attraction by the Bangladesh government. However, there is a lack of research on the impact of tourism on indigenous communities in the context of addressing economic and social marginalization and poverty alleviation (Islam & Carlsen, 2016).

#### **2.4. Domestic tourism in Cox's Bazar**

Although tourism is a relatively small component of the Bangladeshi economy, it has been identified by the Bangladesh government as one of 32 'thrust sectors' with growth potential (Honeck & Akhtar, 2014). Bangladesh has lagged significantly behind its neighbours in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in terms of attracting international tourists. However economic growth and the expansion of a middle class has led to a significant expansion in domestic tourism. An analysis of the composition of the Bangladeshi tourism industry reveals its dependence on domestic tourism sector which generated 97.9% of direct Travel & Tourism GDP in 2014 compared with 2.1% generated by spending by foreign tourists (WTTC, 2015).

Cox's Bazar which is located in the district of Chittagong is one of the most popular destinations for domestic tourists. Located 400km from the capital it has air and road connections to the rest of the country. Cox's Bazar's main attraction for tourism is its claim to have the world's longest uninterrupted natural beach at 120km. Other local attractions include Himchari, Teknaf, Inani beach, a major Buddhist temple at Ramu and the islands of St. Martin (a coral island) and Moheskhal and Sonadi. In July 2015 the government of Bangladesh approved a draft of the Cox's Bazar Development Authority Act 2015 which has the aim of developing the district town into a planned tourism city.

### **3. METHOD**

This research aims to examine gender-based differentials in labour market participation in the domestic tourism industry in the resort of Cox's Bazar. The research is focused on two components of the tourism industry (i) hotels (From 0 star to 5 star) (ii) restaurants (From budget range to set menu dining). The methodology employed in this research is a mixed methods approach. Mixed methods research 'combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration (Johnson, 2004). Quantitative techniques were employed to identify participation rates in hotels, restaurants four major characteristics of quantitative methods are credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Guba, 1985).

In order to examine the extent to which a gender gap exists in the tourism sector in Cox's Bazar, it is necessary to develop a dataset that incorporates gender-based information relating to the number of females and males employed. In order to achieve this, data was collected from tourism businesses in the resort of Cox's Bazar. Cox's Bazar was selected because it is the most popular destination for domestic tourists (Islam 2012). A structured questionnaire incorporating closed questions was developed and the participants were non biased. Sampling was conducted based on an ad hoc and convenience techniques. The sample size for the primary research comprised 20 hotels and 22 restaurants. Field work was conducted over a period of 31 days in August 2017. Research was conducted in the low season in Cox's

Bazar however this paper is not considering seasonality or non-seasonality. The geographic area for data collection location concentrated on Laboni Beach, Suganda Beach and Kolatoli Beach where the majority of the hotels and restaurants are established. Statistical data from the survey were input into excel spreadsheets and the results produced in the form of charts and graphs.

Saunders et al. (2002) note that in order to research socioeconomic events, it is necessary to examine issues relating to culture, values, norms, and socio-political factors which may be difficult to express solely in terms of quantitative data. The inclusion of qualitative methods enables the researcher to analyse how individuals or groups view a problem (Cresswell, 2003). The qualitative aspect of the research was employed to identify factors which contribute to gender-based differentials in participation. The qualitative methodology consisted of short interviews (recorded on video) at data collection period from August 2017 and used to support the quantitative results.

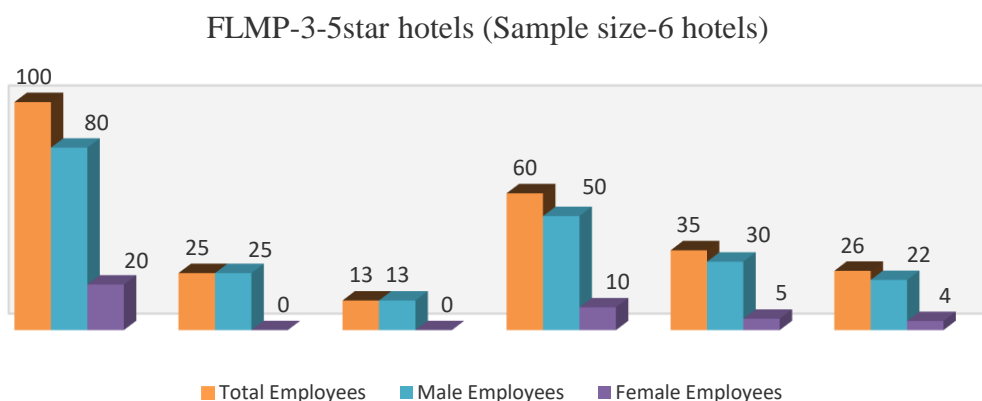
## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1. Quantitative results

An analysis of the results of the quantitative research indicates that female labour market participation in the hotel and restaurant sector of the local tourism industry is significantly lower than the male participation rate. The research indicates that the higher end hotels i.e businesses rated by the Cox Bazar Hotel Association in the range 3 star to 5 star employed a higher percentage of women but still significantly less than the number of males. Hotels in the 0-to-three-star range had lower levels of female employees and the majority of employers in this segment had no female staff. In the restaurant sector the level of female participation in the labour market was lower than the hotel sector. In terms of business ownership, the research demonstrated that there was no incidence of female ownership in the hotel or restaurants included in the sample. A detailed analysis of the results of the quantitative research is outlined below.

#### Female labour market participation (FLMP), 3-5-star hotels

There are 3-to-5-star hotels in the sample primary data collection area in Kolatoli, Suganda and Laboni beach. The sample size for this research was 20 and the 6 hotels which equates of the 3-to-5-star market segment. The results of the data collected are illustrated in the graph below.



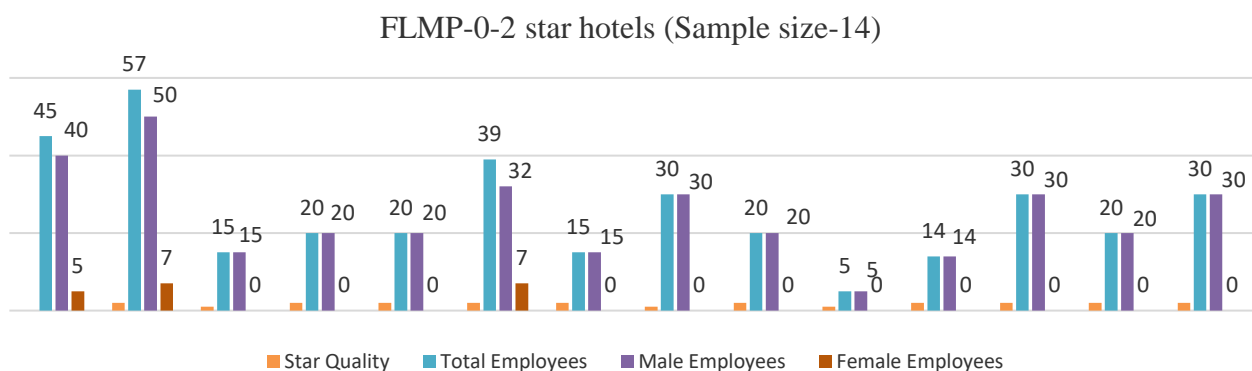
**Figure 1. Female labour market participation (FLMP), 3-5 star hotels.**

(Author's own work' 2018).

The highest level of female labour market participation was in the one 5 star hotel in the sample at 20%. The average rate of female employment was 11% although two of the 3 star hotels in the sample had no female employees. Feedback from an interview with the 5 star hotel which had the highest level of women staff indicated that larger hotels with a dedicated human resources function could provide a working environment which was more conducive to female environment. However even in this environment, there was evidence of delineated gender roles with the female staff employed in laundry and cleaning occupations.

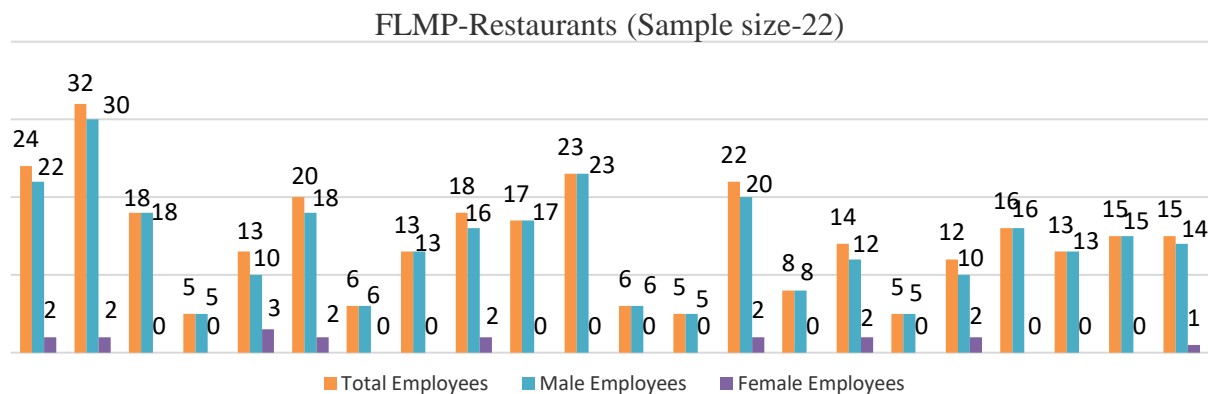
**Female labour market participation (FLMP), 0-2 star hotels**

There are 20 hotels in the primary data collection area in Kolatoli, Suganda and Laboni beach which are rated as 0 to 2 star by Cox’s Bazar Hotel Association. The sample size for this research was 14 hotels which equates to 70% of this segment of the hotel market. The results of the data collected are illustrated in the graph below (Fig. 2).

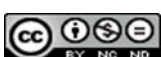


**Figure 2. Female labour market participation (FLMP), 0-2 star hotels.**  
(Author’s own work’ 2018).

79% of hotels in the sample employed no female staff. The highest level of female labour market participation was 18% and the average rate of female employment in this 0 to 2 star hotel segment was only 3%. There was evidence of delineated gender roles with all the women employed in laundry roles. Lack of skills and the unsuitability of the job for women were the 2 reasons cited by hotel managers in this sample for the gender gap in their establishments. 59% of the businesses in the sample did not employ any female staff. The highest level of female participation was 30% and the average rate of female employment was nearly 5% (Fig. 3).



**Figure 3. Female labour market participation (FLMP), Restaurants.**  
(Author’s own work’ 2018).



## **4.2. Qualitative Results**

In the qualitative research interviews the majority of women respondents expressed the desire to work in the hotel and restaurant sectors. However, they believed they did not have the skills or qualifications necessary to obtain this employment and they did not know how to go about accessing tourism employment. The interviewees identified a range of gender-based constraints which constitute barriers to participating in the local tourism workforce. Practical problems included lack of safe transport for women and lack of any childcare facilities. The result is that women are frequently confined to the domestic space, a number also cited social norms which stigmatized women who worked in contact with males who were not relatives. Interviewees mentioned the role of male family members whose permission was often necessary before a woman could seek employment and the traditional view that men should be the main provider.

The discussions in the interviewees supported much of the literature on the influence of gender constraints, social norms and internalized values (Bridges et al., 2011; Islam, 2012; Kabeer, 2001; Salway et al., 2005). The concepts of horizontal and vertical gender segregation cited in the literature (Santos & Varejão, 2007; Campos-Soria et al., 2011; Rinaldi & Salerno, 2019) were also raised in that the respondents perceived certain jobs (e.g. laundry, cleaning, housekeeping) as suitable for women whereas roles such as reception, front of house were regarded as ‘male jobs’ Fear of sexual harassment in the workplace was another barrier mentioned by some the respondents. Responses from owners and managers, of hotels and restaurants (all of whom were male) also indicated delineated gender roles with women relegated to back of house functions such as laundry work with limited scope for interaction with tourists. In the 0-to-2-star hotel segment of the sample the concept of gendered spaces was evident with respondents indicating that this was a working environment which was unsuitable for women.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

As The findings of this research do not support the hypothesis that Tourism supports gender equality by facilitating female participation in the labour market in the case of Cox’s Bazar. In this respect the findings reflect literature (Ferguson, 2011; Staritz & Reis, 2013) which calls into question the proposition put forward by the UNWTO that tourism supports women’s economic empowerment in developing countries. It can be concluded from this research that there is evidence of gender inequality in the domestic tourism industry in Cox’s Bazar in the hotel and restaurant sectors. The results of the quantitative research aspect of the research indicate evidence of a significant gender gap in relation to labour market participation in the hotel and restaurant sectors. Indeed, comparative analysis of industry sectors indicates that the tourism industry lags behind other sectors such as the garment manufacturing industry in terms of female participation in the workplace. There are a wide range of factors which contribute to this situation. Some of the barriers are social in nature including social norms, apprehension about gender-based work-based harassment and the concept of gendered economic spheres. Other barriers contributing to the gender gap relate to practical issues such as safe and affordable transport, childcare and protection from harassment in the workplace.

In terms of policy implications for government and other industry stakeholders, it can be seen that the proposition that growth in the tourism industry inevitably leads to increased participation by women in the labour market cannot be taken for granted.

There is a need for further studies by academics to provide comprehensive quantitative and qualitative research on the extent of the gender gap in the tourism sector and the reasons underpinning this gap. The



scope of such research would include the issues of delineated gender roles in the industry and social barriers preventing women entering the tourism workforce and the situation of ethnic minority women. The recent rapid growth of the garment industry in which the workforce is predominantly female indicates that barriers to labour market participation based on social norms can be overcome. If the Bangladesh government is to achieve its aims of developing tourism as a 'thrust sector' there is a need to put gender at the centre of policy making for development of the domestic tourism industry. Such an approach would impact policy development in the areas of education and vocational training by colleges and NGOs to increase the supply of trained female staff for the tourism industry. This research indicates that addressing the gender gap in the tourism industry should be a priority for Bangladesh if it is to succeed in developing this sector of the economy and as an input into the achievement of Millennium Development Goal 3 to promote gender equality and empower women. In the wider context of the pro-poor tourism agenda, the results of this research indicate that there is an argument for explicit gender equality objectives to be incorporated in strategies for pro-poor tourism projects.

The issue of gender in the tourism industry in Bangladesh has been largely neglected. Further research is necessary into social attitudes towards female participation in the tourism workforce incorporating analysis of gender delineated roles and gendered spaces. In the context of Cox's Bazar, there is a gap in research relating to the specific barriers facing women from ethnic minority communities in terms of accessing employment in the hotel and restaurant sectors.

The data in this study is not without limitation. The unavailability of accurate official statistics of the demographics of the Cox's Bazar region in terms of gender was a key limitation. Sample sizes were limited in the case of the hotel and restaurant sectors. The research was conducted in the low season for tourism and seasonality was not incorporated in the research.

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**Yazar(lar) Hakkında/About Author(s)**

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**Thomas GOMES/thomas.gomes@acsenda.com**

He was a Lecturer in Hospitality and Tourism Management for undergraduate and Masters students for four years from 2016 to March 2020 with New Bucks University, United Kingdom. Previously he taught at University of Greenwich on the BA (Hons) Hospitality and tourism program from 2018 to 2019 and at Bournemouth University for BA (Hons) and Masters programs in 2015, United Kingdom. He is a member of the International Association for Tourism Economics and a Director of Bachelor of Hospitality Management & Tourism (BHMT) program at Acsenda School of Management, Vancouver, Canada. His research interests are economics of tourism, pro poor tourism, the role of domestic and diaspora tourism and gender equality in tourism.

**Adem BLAKE/ ablake@bournemouth.ac.uk**

Adam Blake is a Professor of Economics in the Department of Tourism and Hospitality, Bournemouth University, and Head of the International Centre for Tourism and Hospitality Research. He is a specialist in computable general equilibrium (CGE) modelling and has used this modelling technique to examine the economic interrelationships between tourism and other sectors of the economies of the UK, USA, Scotland, the Canary Islands, Malta, Cyprus, Mauritius and Brazil. His research has provided both theoretical advances and research based evidence for government organisations.