

Women, Water and Tourism in Costa Rica

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In this research project, we set out to understand how changes in the use of water due to tourism development affect gender relations in households, communities and markets. Conducted in Tamarindo, Costa Rica, our research centred on the dynamics of inequalities on a number of different levels: between tourism enterprises and local residents; between men and women; and between women of different social classes and nationalities. This involved a particular focus on how intersecting inequalities play out in terms of the usage of, and attitudes to, water in Tamarindo. We were also concerned with the interdependency between 'productive' (i.e. paid, formal) and 'reproductive' (unpaid, underpaid and informal) economic activity. In contrast to most research on this topic to date, our findings show that *gender matters* in the analysis of tourism and water.

Why is this important?

The tourism industry exerts an enormous strain on water supplies, with per capita use of water by tourists far exceeding that of locals.ⁱ Tourism's disproportionate water consumption has a substantive impact on communities – both environmentally and socioeconomically – generating a host of social problems. This has a particular impact on women, who are central to the provision and management of water at the household and community levels worldwide. Women also occupy a pivotal position in the tourism sector, making up 55.5% of its global workforce.ⁱⁱ Yet, the relationship between tourism and gender (in)equality is complex and sometimes contradictory.ⁱⁱⁱ Although participation in tourism can challenge gender roles,^{iv} there are limits to tourism's potential to empower women.^v

Despite the importance of these issues, there is no substantive research on the links between them. Gender is 'under-theorized and marginal' in literature on women and water.^{vi} There is limited research on the relationship between tourism and the impact of water scarcity on destination populations in developing countries.^{vii} Work on gender and tourism rarely looks at the inter-relationship between gender, water and tourism.^{viii} Our findings address these gaps in the literature.

The situation in Tamarindo, Costa Rica

Costa Rica has a long history of tourism development, a high proportion of women (58.4%) in the tourism workforce^{ix} and the highest levels of migration in Central America.^x While tourism has offered employment to many women, this has reduced the role of male breadwinners and with it their power. Consequently, tourism has affected ideas of masculinity and femininity in many tourism communities.^{xi} Water shortages related to tourism are an increasing challenge. Women protesting tourism's over-use of water demonstrates that it is essential to pay attention to the gender dimensions of tourism and water in Costa Rica.

"The woman is the one who is every day at home, we are the ones that have to wash, to cook, we always have that culture that we use water all the time; [...] at the moment they have no water, if the man goes to work, only the woman knows, the pressure is on women, who is stuck at home" - Marjorie, community leader

In order to explore these ideas, Dr Stroma Cole conducted research in Tamarindo in 2013, a beach destination on the Guanacaste Coast. This involved semi-structured interviews with 44 participants – both women and men; Costa Rican and of other nationalities – including representatives of government departments,

employees of guesthouses and hotels, community-based drinking water organisations (ASADA), civil society organisations and local community representatives.

The recent frenzy of growth in Tamarindo^{xii} has followed an unmanaged pattern of tourism development experienced by many destinations, involving unsustainable resource use, unsustainable tourism and a lack of regulation.^{xiii} In Tamarindo, women make up the bulk of the local tourism workforce. Frontline service and management jobs are predominantly held by women from North America and Western Europe. In contrast, lower paid and menial work is performed by Nicaraguan migrant women, who comprise the majority of tourism workers. Costa Rican women tend to work in professional or clerical positions in the public and community sector, e.g. community-based drinking water organisations (ASADA), but are less present in direct tourism jobs. A lack of adequate tourism management, combined with political and regulatory factors, scarce resources and weak law enforcement have led to water shortages with a disproportionate impact on women.

[Towel usage is] “mad [...] one for by the pool for half an hour, another for the beach and then a couple of hours later another for by the pool ... how many towels can one person use in a day? I don't know why we wash them, we could just dry them.” – German receptionist, Tamarindo

Key Findings

Three key findings can be identified for understanding gender, water and tourism in Costa Rica:

Social reproduction and unpaid labour matter

The gendered division of labour in the workplace and household means that stereotypes and expectations of women's and men's roles in social reproduction play into the gendered dynamics of tourism labour. While both women and men may work outside the home, women are responsible for household chores and childcare. This division places water in the social reproductive realm,

making it a “women's issue”. Gendered discourses of water leave women disproportionately affected by water shortages and water quality issues related to tourism. Moreover, the association of women with water crystallises gender roles and closes down space for negotiating the reallocation of social reproductive tasks.

Intersecting inequalities of gender, class, ethnicity and nationality condition how people in tourism communities experience water problems

Intersectional dynamics work to condition how time and social reproductive activities are distributed in tourism communities. This also relates to migrant flows, with Nicaraguan women occupying the lowest paid jobs while women from Europe and North America work in client facing, front-stage jobs.^{xiv} Furthermore, the impact of water shortages and quality is dependent on social location. For instance, the high mineral content of water means that those who can afford it – middle class Costa Ricans and migrants from the Global North – drink bottled or filtered water, while low income Nicaraguan migrants tend not to. There is also a marked contrast in attitudes to water use between migrant and Costa Rican women, as opposed to tourists and women from the Global North. While the former are deeply concerned with such issues, the latter seem to know or care little about the challenges provoked by tourism's water use in Tamarindo. Greater awareness, however, is evident among tourism workers – whether from Western countries or the Americas – than tourists.

Conflicts over water are gendered, as women have been a major force for challenging water use through tourism development

Costa Rican women are taking on multinationals and shifting the power relations between enterprises and communities over water allocation. For instance, one of Costa Rica's most high profile conflicts over water in tourism development was the Nimboyores project, where women's activism prevented the multinational Melia hotel chain from over-using a local water supply.^{xv} Such cases reflect how women have used their perceived responsibility for water to organise around

resistances to tourism development. It also used to challenge unsustainable tourism illustrates how social reproductive roles can be development.

This research represents a first step in understanding the relationship between gender, tourism and water. For more information on our research, please contact Dr Stroma Cole stroma.cole@uwe.ac.uk or Dr Lucy Ferguson lucyferg@ucm.es.

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