Empowering Women in Tourism in Kenya Through Policy

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Abstract

This study underscores the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Kenya's tourism sector, particularly highlighting its disparate effects on women and advocating for tailored policy measures to address these challenges. Drawing from a comprehensive study involving 363 tourist enterprises across Nairobi, Central, Western, South Rift, and Malindi regions, critical gaps in gender inequalities in various employment levels, access to finances and multiple taxation of businesses were identified, disproportionately affecting women within the industry. In response, three strategic policy advocacy initiatives are proposed. These include affirmative action and women's empowerment, which seek to rectify gender disparities in employment, access to finances, and amalgamation of taxes. This calls for the implementation of targeted interventions such as mentorship programmes, skills development initiatives, and facilitating access to finance and resources for women in the tourism sector. These efforts aim to not only advance gender equality but also enhance the overall resilience and sustainability of the sector. Establishing a Cushioning Fund for Employees and Businesses is advocated to provide crucial financial support, especially to vulnerable groups like women-owned businesses and employees. This fund would serve as a safety net during crises, mitigating economic hardships and bolstering the recovery and resilience-building endeavours of women entrepreneurs and workers in tourism. Lastly, the Amalgamation of Taxes and Levies policy proposal aims to streamline taxation and levy systems within the industry, reducing administrative burdens, enhancing compliance, and ensuring equitable tax distribution. By consolidating and rationalising taxes and levies, this initiative aims to create a conducive business environment for tourism enterprises, including those owned by women, fostering growth, investment, and economic empowerment. In summary, these policy advocacy initiatives are pivotal for addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by women in Kenya's tourism industry amidst the COVID-19 crisis. By promoting gender equality, providing targeted financial support, and streamlining taxation, these initiatives aim to cultivate a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable tourism sector that empowers women economically and contributes to broader socioeconomic development objectives. Through concerted policy efforts, Kenya can navigate future crises and emerge stronger and more equitable.

Keywords: women in tourism, gender inequalities, affirmative action, policy

Introduction

The Coronavirus pandemic profoundly disrupted global livelihoods, prompting governments worldwide to implement travel restrictions to curb the virus's spread (Mollona et al., 2020). In Kenya, such restrictions significantly exacerbated women's vulnerability and worsened existing gender inequalities (McKinsey, 2020). Women were particularly affected by the pandemic not only because they made up the largest share of employees in the tourism industry but also because they were the majority in informal, casual, low-skilled, and seasonal workers, making them vulnerable to shocks (UNCTAD, 2020). The policy and decision-makers needed evidence to support the formulation of policies that would ease the situation and prevent negative consequences in the future, hence prompting this study. The study focused on the gendered impact of travel restriction's government policy response to covid19 pandemic on the tourism industry in Kenya.

The study sought to determine the gendered consequences of travel restrictions on male and female-owned enterprises in Kenya's tourism industry. The objectives were to evaluate the pandemic's impact on employment, incomes, and access to credit/finance and suggest interventions to effectively address future disasters and crises for male and female-owned enterprises. The evidence from the study would influence the formulation of policies and programmes targeted at the tourism industry to enhance women's economic empowerment.

The study profoundly revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic was an inherently gendered crisis as it affected women's and men's businesses in profoundly different ways. It affirmed beyond doubt that it is critical to always examine various contexts from a gender perspective particularly while responding to the crisis.

Methodology

Data was collected from September 2019 to January 2022, employing a descriptive research design. A diverse sample of Kenya's tourism enterprises from five regions (Malindi, Nairobi, Central Kenya, South Rift, and Western Circuit) were randomly selected. The sample consisted of 363 enterprises, with 31% owned by women and 69% by men. These enterprises spanned accommodation, restaurants, tour operators, curio vendors, and theme parks. Data was collected using questionnaires. The qualitative data was collected through interviews with key enterprise owners and managers of associations and organisations in the tourism sector. The qualitative data enriched the findings of the quantitative data by capturing verbatim the feelings and emotions of the stakeholders in the tourist sector.

Summary of study findings

The study revealed that male-owned enterprises were the majority at 70%, while female-owned enterprises constituted 30%. Among the female employees, there was a distressing 43% decline in employment during 2020, accompanied by salary cuts, unpaid leaves, and job losses. Moreover, female-owned enterprises faced lower annual revenues, with 67% earning less than Kes. 5 million. Access to credit for female-owned enterprises was limited due to socio-economic reasons, with only 45% and 11% accessing loans from banks and SACCOs, respectively. The interventions proposed by over 60% of surveyed tourism enterprises advocated for three key policy interventions, including affirmative action, amalgamation of licenses and reduction of taxes, including government support, and establishing funds to cushion enterprises and employees during disasters and crises.

Creating a favourable environment for gender equality in the tourism sector

Gender-specific interventions are imperative to address the gendered disparities magnified by travel restrictions during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Affirmative action, a critical policy for levelling the business playing ground and creating a more inclusive and gender-responsive environment for women to thrive economically, is urgently needed in the tourism sector. In addition, interventions to enhance women's involvement and active participation in decision-making levels and economic empowerment, including providing targeted financial support, facilitating access to credit, and fostering skills development, will be needed. Further, it is crucial to take seriously the measures suggested by most of the surveyed enterprises, such as amalgamation or reduction of taxes and licenses. The next section examines some of these interventions in detail based on the study findings and discussions.

Affirmative Action Policy

Affirmative action in the context of gender is the practice or policy of favouring the gender that is disadvantaged or is subject to discrimination. It aims at promoting equity, equality and diversity by giving underrepresented groups preferential treatment. Affirmative action measures in the context of women's empowerment seek to address historical and ongoing discrimination against women in various spheres of life. Women have long been underrepresented in leadership positions, particularly in male-dominated fields such as tourism. They have faced discrimination in employment, pay disparities and barriers to advancement, particularly at decision-making levels. Affirmative action policies are stop-gap measures whose purpose is to level the playing field by giving women or disadvantaged groups more opportunities, resources and support to succeed. While some argue that affirmative action is a form of reverse discrimination, its supporters argue that it is a necessary step toward gender equality and correcting historical injustices.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated women's vulnerability and worsened existing gender inequalities (McKinsey, 2020). Women were particularly affected by the pandemic not only because they made up the largest share of employees, 54%, in the tourism industry but also because they were the majority in the informal, casual, low-skilled, and seasonal workers in the industry, making them vulnerable to shocks (UNCTAD, 2020).

The gendered Impact travel restrictions study that was conducted between 2019 and 2021 aimed at evaluating the pandemic's impact on employment, incomes, and access to credit/finance and suggest interventions that would effectively addressing future disasters and crises for male and female-owned enterprises. On ownership of enterprises in the tourism sector at the regional level, the study revealed that the enterprises owned by women were much fewer than the enterprises owned by women as shown in the figure below:

Gendered Ownership of Enterprise by Region

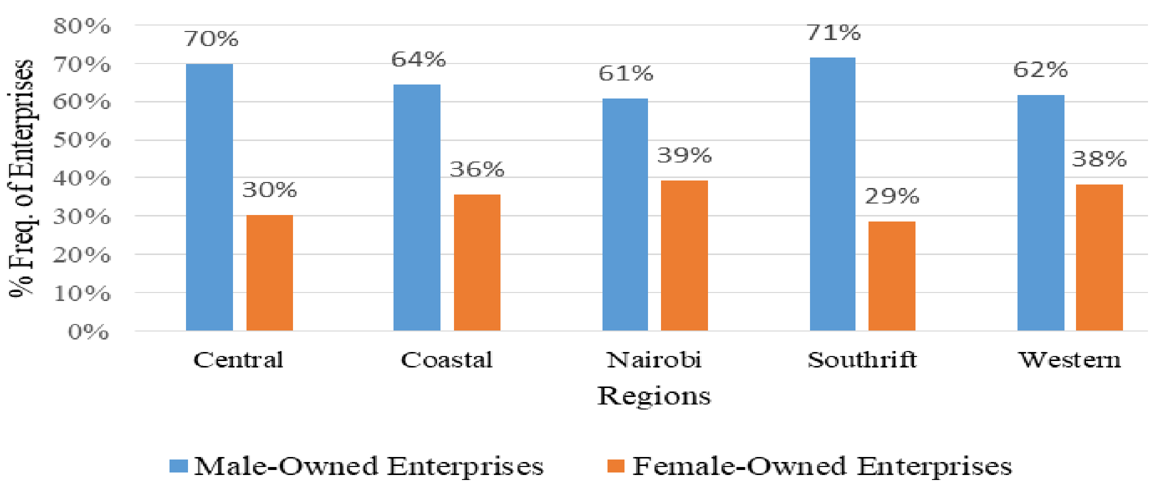

Figure1: Gendered Ownership of Enterprise by Region

Figure 1 shows that at the regional level, in the central region, male-owned enterprises were 70% compared to 30% female-owned enterprises. The coastal region had 64% male-owned and 36% female-owned. In Nairobi, male-owned enterprises represented 61% compared to 39% of female-owned enterprises. The South Rift region had the highest percentage of males, with 71%, compared to 29% of female-owned. Lastly, in the Western region, male-owned comprised 62% while female-owned constituted 38%. The Men-owned 64% (220) of the total enterprises surveyed compared to 36% (125) of female-owned enterprises, and 19 enterprises were co-owned. The study results showed an apparent disparity in business ownership between men and women in the Kenyan tourism sector, with male-owned businesses dominating all size categories except small-scale enterprises.

These results are consistence with Handaragama and Kusakabe's (2021) study in Sri Lanka, which reported that "women-owned enterprises formed only 27% of all enterprises" (p.8). They also resonate with that of Claudio-Quiroga et al. (2022) in Spain, who found a significant gender gap in business ownership across various sectors of over 40% on average. Thus, this highlights the need for targeted policies and initiatives to support and promote women's entrepreneurship, particularly in medium and larger businesses, to address the gender gap in ownership and promote gender equity and equality in the tourism industry and beyond.

The disparities in ownership of enterprises is not only by the region. It is also found in the sizes of enterprises owned by women and men, Sizes of enterprises by gender

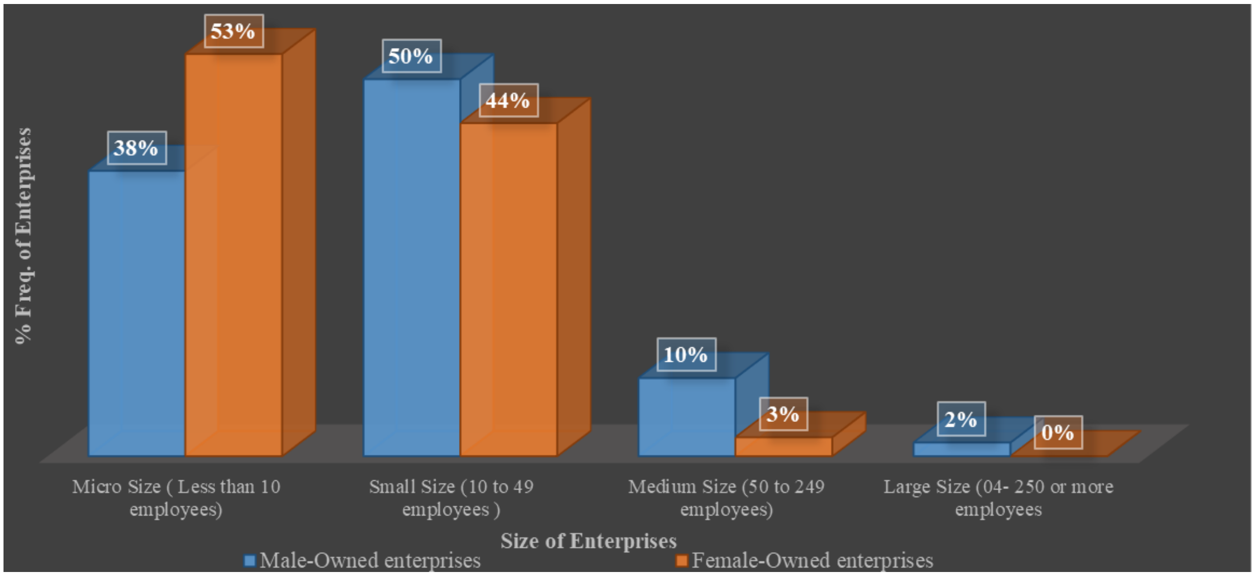

Figure 2: Size of Enterprises by Gender in the Tourism Sector in Kenya

Figure 2 shows a significant gender difference in the sizes of business ownership in the tourism sector in Kenya. In the small category (those that hire less than 10 employees), businesses owned by men account for 38% of enterprises, while those owned by women account for 53%. In the category that employs between 10-49 employees, businesses owned by men account for 50% of enterprises, while businesses owned by women account for 44%. In the medium-sized category, businesses owned by men account for 10% of businesses, while those owned by women account for 3% of the total. In the large-sized category, businesses owned by men account for 2% while women owned no enterprises in this category.

These percentages show a significant gender difference in tourism business ownership during the government's travel restrictions policy. Women-owned businesses were more prevalent in the small and medium-sized categories, while male-owned enterprises dominated in the medium-sized and large-sized categories.

The gender disparities were not only found in the ownership and sizes of enterprises but also in employment. In 2019, male employees were in higher numbers than female employees in most employment categories, including contract and permanent. In 2020, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a decrease in the number of employees in all categories, and female employees were affected more than male employees. In 2021, there was a slight increase in the number of employees compared to 2020. The gender disparity still existed, with male employees having higher numbers in most categories.

The actual figures obtained during the study reveal that in 2019, out of a total of 12,237 workers in the tourism sector, 5862 (45%) were women, and 6375 (44%) were men. This shows insignificant gender disparities. However, in 2020, gender disparity changed dramatically. Out of a total of 13,960 workers in the sector, 3287 (25%) were women while 3673 (25%) were men. This showed a decrease in the number of women employed in the tourism sector. In 2021, the gender disparity continued to change slightly in favour of men. Out of a total of 8357 workers in the sector, 3868 (30%) were women, while 4489 (31%) were men.

The study results showed that the gender gap in employment continued to widen in all employment categories over the three years of study. Although there were some changes in the gender distribution, the general trend, according to the study, was that men held a higher percentage of employment than women. These findings highlighted the ongoing need to address gender inequality in employment and promote gender responsiveness in all employment categories in tourism enterprises.

The results are in line with those of Popović-Pantić, Vasilić, and Semenčenko (2020), who found that women-owned enterprises were negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and that women who lost employment replaced it with work at home and care of family members. Reichelt, Makovi, and Sargsya (2020) also reported that women’s employment was negatively affected by COVID-19 in European societies. These findings also agree with Kabeer et al. (2021), who found that women's employment received the highest decline during COVID-19.

Again, these results were consistent with those of Casale and Posel (2020), who reported that more women lost their jobs in South Africa than men. As of February 2020, according to Casale and Posel (2020), 30% of women who had jobs were no longer employed by April 2020, while only 20% of men had lost their jobs. Furthermore, the situation for women employees in the sector increased by 6%. However, gender disparity was still a significant issue as men’s employment level rose significantly from 52% to 58% from 2020 to 2021 compared to women, who reported a job loss of 6%. These effects of the government travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic are in tandem with those of Casale and Posel (2020), who showed that in 2020 only 7% of women who were unemployed in February 2020 were employed in April 2020, while 16% of men in the same situation gained employment.

The results show a persistent gender gap in the tourism industry in Kenya, with men holding a higher percentage of positions than women in all employment categories except for volunteers/graduates. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this gender disparity, with female employees being more affected than male employees in terms of job loss. Men also had higher incomes than women in all the three years. The percentage of male workers earning in various salary brackets increased slightly while the rate of female workers decreased by 7% from 53% in 2020 to 46% in 2021 on the average salary wages. Furthermore, Women were 16% and 12% more affected than male employees by salary cuts and job losses, respectively, than men. These results are consistent with what Meegaswatta's (2021) study found in Sri Lanka, that female employees "endured pay cuts ranging from 10–30% of their salaries" compared to male employees who reported meagre pay cuts (p.165).

With regard to the revenue levels, the study showed that in the tourism sector, businesses owned by men account for 29% of companies with revenue of less than Kes.1 million, 34% of companies with revenue between Kes.1 million and less of Kes.5 million, and 24% of businesses with income between Kes.5 million and less than Kes.20 million. For the higher income bracket, men-owned enterprises accounted for 5% of enterprises with income between Kes.20 million and less than Kes.50 million, 5% of enterprises with income between Kes.50 million and below, and 2% of businesses with income of Kes.100 million and more. On the other hand, businesses owned by women account for 31% of companies with income of less than Kes.1 million, 36% of companies with revenue between Kes.1 million and less than Kes.5 million, and 22% of businesses with income between Kes.5 million and less than Kes.20 million. For the higher income bracket, women-owned businesses account for 9% of enterprises with income between Kes.20 million and less than Kes.50 million and 1% of businesses with income between Kes.50 million and below. More than Kes.100 million, and 2% of enterprises with income of Kes. 100 million and more.

These percentages reveal that there is a gender gap in the distribution of income in the tourism sector in Kenya. While women-owned businesses are overrepresented in the lower income brackets, male-owned enterprises are overrepresented in the higher income brackets. This highlights the need for policies and programmes that promote gender equity and equality in the tourism sector, especially regarding access to resources and opportunities for growth and development.

These results are consistent with Bain and Company's (2020) study in India, which revealed that more than 70% of female entrepreneurs in India reported decreased enterprise revenues due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Popović-Pantić, Semenčenko, and Vasilić (2020) study in Serbia found that less than 16% of female entrepreneurs managed to make online sales of their services and products as compared to over 70% of male entrepreneurs. As reported by Zarrilli and Aydiner-Avsar (2020), women entrepreneurs working in the tourism sector are at a higher risk of facing business closures and bankruptcy compared to male entrepreneurs in the absence of targeted policies aimed at supporting them. Therefore, these results indicate that gender disparity exists in the tourism industry in Kenya, with female-owned businesses facing more significant challenges in generating revenue than male-owned businesses.

These findings highlight the need to address gender inequality in tourism enterprises and promote gender equity and equality in enterprise ownership, all employment categories and financial disparities, especially during times of disasters and crisis. It is critical to be apprehensive of the fact that addressing gender inequalities requires creating a favourable and supportive policy environment for women entrepreneurs to start and grow their businesses, promoting access to finance and training opportunities, and providing targeted support during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. By doing so, gender equity and equality will be addressed and Kenya's tourism industry will be more robust and sustainable. Addressing gender inequality in the tourism sector will require the active participation of all stakeholders in the industry and policymakers to create an enabling environment for women entrepreneurs and business owners

Amalgamation of licences and tax policy

Multiple licenses and heavy taxation were found to have had adverse effects on both men's and women-owned enterprises. They were said to have affected businesses negatively leading a large number of businesses to close down. These effects may not be specific to the gender of the business owner but can disproportionately impact women-owned businesses due to pre-existing disparities. Some of the adverse effects included: reduced profitability - high taxes significantly reduce enterprises profitability. This meant that both men and women-owned businesses had less money to reinvest in their operations, hire new employees, or expand their businesses, especially after the removal of COVID-19 travel restrictions. Further, high taxation stifled growth and investment and discouraged entrepreneurs from starting new businesses and existing businesses from expanding. This limited job creation and economic growth.

Multiple licenses and high tax bills were reported to strain a business's cash flow, making it difficult to cover operational expenses or invest in necessary resources like equipment, marketing, or research and development. Enterprises, both female and male-owned, reduced investment in employees and made it challenging for businesses to offer competitive salaries and benefits. This made it difficult for enterprises to attract and retain talent. Further, high taxes discouraged individuals from continuing to operate their businesses as they felt the government was not assisting them during difficult times. These limited opportunities for entrepreneurship among both men and women, therefore, led to the shrinking of the operations. Many business owners, both men and women, were on the verge of closing down when the researchers visited their businesses.

The study also revealed that there was limited access to capital, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis, which implied a reduced amount of money available for businesses to borrow or invest in. This affected both men and women-owned enterprises, although women-owned businesses were found to face higher challenges in accessing capital, making the impact more significant.

Women-owned enterprises and businesses are predominantly vulnerable to shocks because they are disproportionately concentrated in informal, low-paying sectors and lack elementary formal social defence that would cushion against economic distress (Kaberia and Muathe, 2021). Afifu *et al*. (2022) noted that the pandemic’s effect on informal businesses expanded the loss of government revenues. Hence, these businesses’ inability to obtain revenues affected taxes and levies (Wang, 2020). It is reported that in Kenya, there were too many licenses needed to set up and operate a business. Therefore, there is a need to review the licensing system to reduce or consolidate the multiple licenses currently in force and present the same in an e-platform for ease of administration.

To mitigate these adverse effects, it's essential for policymakers to design levies and taxation policies that take into account the needs and challenges faced by all businesses, including those owned by women. This might involve providing targeted incentives or support to help women-owned enterprises to thrive and grow. Additionally, simplifying tax systems and reducing compliance burdens can benefit all businesses, making it easier for them to succeed in a competitive market.

The following recommendations may assist in improving the business environment:

- Improve Transparency and Accountability- The government should improve transparency and accountability in the tax system, including providing more information on tax revenues and how they are utilised.
- Consolidate the numerous taxes and levies and institute a one-stop-shop to make it easier for enterprise owners, both men and women, to comply and reduce time wastage.
- Improve communication and tax administration- the Kenya Revenue Authority (KRA) should be adequately resourced and staffed to avoid casuals being sent to collect dues.
- Investments in technology, as well as increased taxpayer education and awareness, are essential.
- Increase the Tax Base- The government should look into ways to increase the tax base, such as bringing more businesses and individuals into the formal economy to avoid overtaxing the few that already comply.
- Combat Corruption-The government should take steps to combat corruption in the tax system, including using technology to reduce opportunities for bribery and other forms of corruption.

In conclusion, women informal workers' socioeconomic vulnerability increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including related shocks, lockdowns, and non-gender responsive policies of the government of Kenya. It is imperative to recognise and address the gendered impacts of pandemics on the tourism industry, including the taxes and levies collected from them. Policymakers and stakeholders should promote gender responsiveness and support women's economic empowerment during and after disasters and crises, including consolidating suffocating levies and taxes to create a favourable environment for promoting women-owned enterprises

Funds to cushion enterprises and employees during disasters and crises

The COVID-19 pandemic and stay-home orders created an uncharted territory for remote work, where many workers had to switch to a new mode of work with minimum preparation (Bin et al. 2021). The situation was further complicated by the fact that many workers had challenges in accessing technology while some had no prior knowledge of ICT (Vaziri et al. 2020). Many employees had to spend time learning new technologies to complete their work and to adjust to repeated changes in work procedures (Fogarty et al. 2021).

Tourism enterprise employees had to adapt to new technologies, face potential connectivity issues, and juggle work responsibilities with personal obligations. It was expected that employers would be able to provide assistance to employees on remote working by ensuring they can access technology and flexible schedules, including acquiring technological tools and being equipped with basic ICT training to support remote working. From the study, it was found that almost all the tourism enterprises had not offered any support to their employees on remote working. This consequently resulted in the loss of jobs, affecting the livelihoods of the employees. Further, financial support from the government was reported as non-existent. This is in tandem with a study by UNHCRR (2020), which revealed that none of the respondents received government financial support, with 69% not even aware that the COVID-19 economic stimuli package existed, and 20% reported having received assistance from faith-based organisations and private companies. To make matters complicated, employers failed to provide adequate financial support, leaving employees struggling to make ends meet.

To support and cushion employees and enterprises during times of disasters and crisis, the study recommended that the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders, should adopt a multi-faceted approach in formulating policies and frameworks that are comprehensive, proactive, and up-to-date and in line with the national and international guidelines to cushion the industry in financial matters. Again, clear communication channels in all tourism industry enterprises to foster a positive work environment at all times. In addition, the enterprise owners should ensure that there are mechanisms in place to provide regular updates, particularly on anticipated changes that require transformations, have a stable and consistent means of communication, and ensure the communication /digital platforms are user-friendly to ensure effective information sharing during crises and disasters.

The Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife should encourage the establishment of a contributary scheme where enterprise owners and employees could save, and such money be used to support employees during times of disasters and crises. This can be achieved through unionisation of all employees and enterprises and devising financial policies for emergencies in times of crisis. This will lower distress during crisis times.

The foregoing affirms that the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in one of the most severe job losses, hence exacerbating poverty and widening inequalities as a consequence. Enterprises must now do everything possible to prevent this job crisis from escalating into a social crisis in the future. Preparedness in the form of establishing strong and more resilient financial sustainability is an important investment in the future.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the gendered impact of travel restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic in the tourism sector in Kenya, articulating that it exacerbated gender inequality, with women disproportionately affected and facing more significant challenges in recovering from the economic impact of the pandemic. The study results emphasise the need for policymakers and stakeholders in the tourism sector to consider gender impacts in response to disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gender-sensitive interventions and policies are essential in promoting women's economic empowerment and reducing the adverse effects of conflict on gender equality in the tourism sector. Such interventions may include affirmative action, amalgamation of levies and taxes and funds to cushion employees and enterprises during times of disasters and crisis. By prioritising gender-responsive policies and interventions, policymakers and stakeholders will promote gender equity and equality in the tourism sector and ensure that women are not left behind in recovering from the economic impact of any pandemic such as COVID-19.

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