



Final Report

**UNWTO Regional Conference on the Empowerment of
Women in Tourism in Asia and the Pacific**

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1. Introduction

Although tourism is a vital platform for women employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, tourism employment depicts a mixed picture of women's empowerment and exploitation¹. For one, women comprise of 54% of tourism workforce but are under-represented in management roles and earn 14.7% less than men ([Global Report on Women in Tourism Second Edition](#)). This gender inequality has been exacerbated by COVID-19 – the global crisis has had the most devastating and unprecedented impact on the tourism industry. Given that women make up more than half of the tourism workforce, the COVID-19 pandemic has also impacted women disproportionately. In addition, [women are over-represented in part-time, casual and seasonal jobs and likely to experience exploitations and poor working conditions](#)². The women in tourism who are in low-skilled or informal work have less access to social protection and this puts them in a precarious position during a pandemic. While women are at the front line of COVID-19 response as healthcare workers, innovators and leaders, their contributions remain less visible and less valued than men's. In Asia and the Pacific, while gender inequalities vary across cultures and traditions, the catastrophic effects of the pandemic were felt more acutely by women in tourism, from the loss of jobs to a rise in violence against women and unpaid care work.

As countries take tentative steps to restart tourism and in-line with the objectives of the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 \(to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls\)](#), UNWTO organised its first ***Regional Conference on the Empowerment of Women in Tourism in Asia and the Pacific*** in collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture of Malaysia. It took place in hybrid format in Kuala Lumpur from 16-17 November 2021. This conference was designed to move the production of tourism knowledge away from neo-colonialism and previous conference structures that have privileged men³.

¹ Hutchings, K., Moyle, C. L., Chai, A., Garofano, N., & Moore, S. (2020). Segregation of women in tourism employment in the APEC region. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, DOI:[10.1016/j.tmp.2020.100655](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2020.100655).

² Santero-Sanchez, R., Segovia-Pérez, M., Castro-Núñez, B., Figueroa-Domecq, C., & Talón-Ballester, P. (2015). Gender differences in the hospitality industry: A Job quality index. *Tourism Management*, 51, 234-246. doi:10.1016/j.tourman.2015.05.025

³ Khoo-Lattimore, C., Yang, E. C. L., & Je, J. S. (2019). Assessing gender representation in knowledge production: a critical analysis of UNWTO's planned events. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2019.1566347>

The conference saw over 500 online participants and an additional 100 on-site delegates, representing the public and private sectors, international organizations, non-profit organizations, and academic institutions.

1.1 Conference objectives

The following were the main objectives of the regional conference:

1. To evaluate the extent to which COVID-19 has contributed to worsening the socio-economic situation of women among the tourism workforce in the Asia-Pacific region.
2. To facilitate a policy dialogue to raise awareness and shape better policies that create opportunities for women to benefit from tourism development.
3. To explore ways to improve the working conditions and career progression of women employees in tourism in order to build resilience for crisis situations (such as COVID-19) that cause high unemployment.
4. To exchange good practices and improve the enabling environment for enhancing women's employment in the tourism sector.

1.2 Thematic areas of the conference

The conference focussed on 4 thematic areas based on the [UNWTO Action Plan on Women in Tourism](#) in the context of the impact of COVID-19 on the women in tourism labour force.

The areas of focus were:

- Tourism recovery policies through a gendered lens
- Women's employment and leadership
- Education and training for the realities of post-COVID19 tourism
- Data and statistics for an inclusive recovery

1.3 Methodology

The methodology for the conference recognised the structural gender inequality for women in tourism but was also deliberate in considering the intersection of, and the mutually constitutive relations between gender and other social identities such as ethnicity. The criticality of the conference lies in its agenda to advance socio-economic changes for women in tourism.

The conference was a virtual/in-person hybrid format with the aim of reaching as many people as possible, and therefore the different sessions were planned, to be useful to a broad and varied audience.

The conference was also live-streamed onto the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC)'s Youtube channel (MOTAV TV). Day 1 of the conference is accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eORiTwLrbEw> while Day 2 is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NvbEKUdaumE>.

2. Conference Programme

Four main sessions were planned to centre on the four thematic areas of the conference. Two were held on the first day and the other two on the second day. Each of these four one-hour sessions consisted of between three and four panellists and a moderator.

To complement the four sessions, five enrichment sessions were designed into the conference to add practical value to the participants, in particular the online audience. While the four main sessions may disseminate knowledge and techniques for long term management strategies and policy change, the five enrichment sessions served as more practical, direct, active and immediate methods for activating change. Based on these planned sessions and activities, the full conference programme is available on page16 as Annex 3.

3. Key highlights

3.1 Policies for recovery

Some important milestones for policies were achieved at this conference, beginning with the acknowledgement by Malaysian Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture that their hosting of the conference was a significant indicator of the region's commitment to including gender equality in the agenda for tourism recovery.



Figure 2: Dato' Sri Nancy Shukri, the Minister of Tourism, Culture and Arts, Malaysia giving her opening remarks.

The presence and representation of Ms. Siriporn Rathie from UN Women at the conference giving her congratulatory remarks was a significant marker, helping to spotlight the importance of a women's empowerment agenda in the region. The in-person presence of Mr. Harry Hwang at the conference pledging UNWTO's commitment to gender equality was also an important beginning for the region's tourism stakeholders to begin thinking about their own action plans and strategies for women's empowerment.

Indeed, panellists in the first high-level panel revealed their specific strategic action to practice inclusive tourism development for women, youths and

disadvantaged groups in their new national tourism policy and outlined the budgets that were available for women empowerment strategies. The private sector was also seen to be taking important steps towards gender parity, where tourism company policies have been drawn up to support mothers and programmes to elevate women in their hospitality careers.

Discussions however also uncovered the need for more data and research insights on women in tourism and to apply data more holistically. There was also a call for policies that would impel the sector to make the required changes for gender equality.

3.2 Women's employment, entrepreneurship and leadership in Tourism

Panelists highlighted that the path upwards and forwards for women in tourism, particularly in Asia, the Pacific and the Middle East, is not an easy one, and provided recommendations for women to “find their tribe” and identify good mentors. Although there was a dedicated panel on women's employment, entrepreneurship and leadership, discussions on the topic also emerged in other sessions. In the Data & Insights panel for example, an appeal was heard for women to be entrepreneurs and leaders, not just producers. There were calls for tourism organizations and countries to champion women's needs, and to recognise the structural barriers and the constraints of social norms that impede women's progress in employment, entrepreneurship, and leadership. There were also calls to enable more female tour guides and to enact gender-responsive procurement and gender mainstreaming strategies. A pertinent question from a male audience aptly summarised this theme, “How do we win women back into the industry?”

3.3 Education and training for women

The conference modelled the importance of education and training for women in tourism by building in multiple workshops, including a gender trivia which raised awareness on the importance of addressing gender equality in tourism;

a workshop to empower women to leadership; a partnership challenge to empower and teach women to network differently; and a session simulating a university lecture on co-creating the tourism experience.

In addition, a Pecha-Kucha session highlighted the trajectory of education and training for women in general, then in Europe, and subsequently for women in Asia and the Pacific. In the same session, suggestions were made to include men as allies and mentors and to build women's networks for awareness building and mentorship. The topic of training and education also came up in the discussions of other panels. For example, in the high-level panel on policies, the Minister of Tourism for Malaysia advocated for an inclusive budget for training.

Discussions concluded the fact that while there are increasing opportunities for training and education, very few incorporate gender-awareness training. Questions were also raised as to if any data has been collected on the percentages of women who have undergone training, and of those, what percentages are accorded to women in tourism.

3.4 Best practices

Throughout the conference, speakers and panellists showcased best practices and successes from around the region, with interventions from: Sri Lanka, Nepal, Japan the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, India, South Korea, Samoa, Hong Kong and Macao. Speakers also presented existing good practices from the United Kingdom and Europe. These case studies demonstrated the resilience and resourcefulness of women-owned businesses and women in tourism but more importantly, it highlighted to companies and countries that women when empowered, can be economically competitive, and that gender parity is not just good for women, it is good for societies.

4. Conclusion

Despite the limitations, particularly those imposed by COVID-19 restrictions in Malaysia, the conference was successful and marked an important shift for women in tourism in Asia and the Pacific. The conference featured a diverse panel of expert speakers who were all women and provided delegates with diverse formats of knowledge dissemination and discussions. At this conference, delegates were exposed to figures, numbers and statistics; shared stories and strategies; explored entrepreneurship, education, training, employment and leadership; and advocated for gender-sensitive policies and an inclusive tourism recovery. As a result, the delegates were seen to be highly engaged when opportunities for interactions arose, particularly on the online platforms. While they highlighted existing barriers and called for change, speakers, presenters and panelists were in general, very optimistic and passionate about tourism as an industry that can advance gender equality and hopeful about the future of women in tourism.

For future conferences, it is recommended that the no segments of the conference comprise an all-male line-up as this contradicts the aim and objectives of the conference. Additionally, it would increase engagement between on-site audience and virtual speakers if the audio-visual requirements had allowed for such interaction.

UNWTO hopes to organize more initiatives and events on women's empowerment in tourism in Asia and the Pacific in the future and urges member states interested in hosting to get in contact with UNWTO.

Annex 1: Welcome speech and opening remarks by YB Dato Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri, Minister, Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Malaysia

Assalamualaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh, and a very good morning.

Mr. Harry Hwang

World Tourism Organisation Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific

Datuk Wira Dr. Noor Zari Hamat

Secretary General of the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia

Honourable Ministers, Deputy Ministers and Heads of National Tourism Organisations,

Excellencies, Ambassadors and High Commissioners,

Distinguished Speakers and Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to wish everyone a warm welcome.

Selamat Datang.

1. First of all, thank you for taking the time to join us on this very special occasion. It is truly an honour for Malaysia to host the inaugural UNWTO Regional Conference on the Empowerment of Women in Tourism in Kuala Lumpur, even as we are compelled to convene in a hybrid manner against the backdrop of ongoing travel restrictions and border closures in the region.
2. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the diverse audiences and speakers of this conference, both in the room today and those from afar who are making their presence felt remotely. While we regrettably could not have our international delegates in attendance, let me assure you that a safe reopening for Malaysia is on the horizon and we look forward to meeting you in person very soon.

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

3. Let me begin by briefly reflecting on the current state of gender equality and tourism in the global and regional context. According to the World Bank, progress in closing the gender gap in advanced economies is significant; in the United States for instance, women-owned firms were growing at more than double the rate of all other firms prior to the pandemic, contributing nearly \$3 trillion to the U.S. economy, and directly responsible for 23 million jobs. It was further estimated that if all countries matched their best-in-region country in progress toward gender parity, an additional annual GDP of \$12 trillion could be reached in 2025 – double the likely contribution of women to global GDP growth in the business-as-usual scenario.
4. Notably in some countries, tourism had almost twice as many women employers as other sectors, offering significant opportunities for women to run their own enterprises. In this region, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand have been highlighted for having more than half of tourism businesses run by women. It is these enterprising women who make up the true fabric of families and communities while enabling the informal sector as an exporter of tourism services from retailing craft items and offering tour guide services or providing homestay accommodation to community, heritage and cultural experiences.
5. That being said, the women and youth, rural populations and small and micro enterprises which make up the majority of tourism enterprises in the region are also particularly vulnerable and at risk of being adversely impacted by the global pandemic due to lower resilience as well as a lack of resources to mitigate external shocks. Therefore, as part of efforts to advance a more inclusive recovery for the tourism sector which is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and particularly SDG 5 on gender equality, I believe this 2-day conference will provide us with deep insights on the data trends, strategies and the future prospects for women in tourism in the Asia-Pacific region.

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

6. As we deliberate on an imminent revival for travel and tourism with opportunities to rebuild to greater strengths, I am proud to note that the hosting of this Regional Conference is a significant milestone on Malaysia's road to recovery, which coincides with the reopening of Malaysia's popular island destination of Langkawi to international tourists.
7. The Langkawi International Tourism Bubble which officially commenced yesterday on the 15th of November is aligned with Malaysia's National Recovery Plan and Tourism Recovery Plan in support of a gradual shift from the "zero-COVID" approach towards an endemic strategy which allows easing of restrictions for vaccinated travellers. Some of the supporting initiatives have included training and certification programmes to equip tourism service providers, safe travel campaigns to boost the confidence of travellers, and the acceleration of vaccinations for the local population and tourism workforce.
8. It is encouraging to note that almost 98% of the Malaysian adult population has since received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, including 95% of the population which is now fully vaccinated. With this remarkable progress, I am optimistic that the successful execution of the Langkawi pilot initiative would serve as a benchmark and stepping stone towards a full reopening for Malaysia in the near future. More importantly, the phased reopening of island destinations in this region have prompted yet others to emulate these examples, which augurs well for the potential of intra-regional and cross-border tourism in Asia-Pacific that represented Malaysia's largest market share prior to the pandemic.

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

9. Before I conclude, I would like to take this opportunity to extend my deepest appreciation to UNWTO for continuing to lead the global effort on tourism recovery with various initiatives that have actively involved Malaysia and our regional counterparts. My special thanks also to all member states in the region,

for your unanimous support and trust in Malaysia as Chair of the Regional Commission for East Asia and the Pacific in this renewed term of 2021-2023.

10. Finally, I particularly want to thank Mr. Hwang and the rest of his team for being with us today. We are most grateful for your friendship and close partnership in making this event a success.
11. With that, I wish you all a fruitful 2 days of deliberations and hope you will benefit tremendously from the expert speakers lined up as well as the engaging interactive sessions planned throughout this regional conference.

Thank you. *Terima kasih.*

Annex 2: Opening remarks by Mr. Harry Hwang, Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific, UNWTO

Her Excellency, Dato' Sri Hajah Nancy Haji Shukri – Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture of Malaysia,

Her Excellency, Madam Giri Adnyani, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, Indonesia

Her Excellency, Ambassador, Dawa Sherpa,

Honourable Ms. Pansy Ho – Vice-Chairperson and Secretary-General of Global Tourism Economy as well as UNWTO Ambassador for Sustainable Tourism,

Distinguished Guests, esteemed Speakers, Friends and colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen.

A very good morning from Kuala Lumpur to you all!

I feel greatly honoured to welcome you this morning – both in person and online participants to this historic *UNWTO Regional Conference on the Empowerment of Women in Tourism in Asia and the Pacific*.

Let me begin my remarks by expressing my heartfelt appreciation, on behalf of UNWTO, to the Government of Malaysia, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture of Malaysia and Malaysia Convention and Exhibition Bureau (MyCEB), for very warm hospitalities and excellent arrangements you've made for this important conference.

I would like to extend my most sincere thanks to all participants for joining us in the beautiful city of Kuala Lumpur either virtually or physically to share ideas on a subject of such universal significance – the empowerment of women in tourism.

I consider this occasion historic because it is not just the first time the subject of the Empowerment of women in tourism is being tabled in our region, but it is also the first time we're organising it in a hybrid format.

The first question you may be asking is how this theme acquired such a universal attention. It all boils down to one thing: the exploitation and discrimination against women all around the world in various sectors of the economy and society.

And we see this in inequalities in pay and the wide gap between the number of men and women recruited into high-level positions. Also, even though I'm a man, I find it is very sad that in all regions of the world, women's leadership at the highest levels of decision-making is the exception rather than the rule.

So what has UNWTO been doing in the face of these challenges?

We began to act in the late 1990s when we came to the realisation through our research that in the world of tourism, women make up most of the tourism workforce worldwide. And gender equality issues prevail in both the public and private tourism sectors.

The first thing we did was to reflect the issue of gender inequality in our *Global Code of Ethics for Tourism* which was adopted by the 13th session of our General Assembly in 1999. In this document, apart from many other things, we urged stakeholders to ensure that tourism activities respect the equality of men and women, equal treatment, and non-discrimination in the workplace.

We took a step further to address gender equality matters in tourism circles by joining forces with UN Women and other partners the world over to advocate for and to promote the empowerment of women through tourism development. By so doing, UNWTO has been contributing to international efforts to attain SDG 5 on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Through this collaboration with UN Women, we have produced 2 editions of Global Report on Women in Tourism and we recently launched the first regional version on the Middle East.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Being here today to debate on the Empowerment of Women in Tourism in Asia and the Pacific is UNWTO's next major activity, but this time, to call attention to this important subject in our region.

The fact is, gender inequality has been aggravated by COVID-19; and as we all know, it is the global crisis that has had the most devastating and unprecedented impact on

the tourism industry; but sadly, women have felt its impact the most because of their disadvantaged positions in low-skilled or informal jobs, which affords them less access to social protection and puts them in a precarious position during a pandemic. Also, out of the millions who have lost their jobs, women form the majority.

In light of the foregoing, one of our main objectives for organizing this regional conference is to evaluate the extent to which COVID-19 has contributed to worsening the socio-economic situation of women among the tourism workforce in the Asia-Pacific region.

We also intend to explore ways to improve the working conditions and career progression of women employees in tourism so that they can be resilient for crisis situations (such as COVID-19) that cause high unemployment.

I am so pleased to see such a wide range of speakers and panellists from our member states in the region, the business sector, the academia and the UN family who are going to join the discussions on the topic of women empowerment in tourism.

I am confident that the lessons we're going to draw from the debates will enrich our knowledge on the theme of this conference and help us to take concrete steps to lessen the incidences of inequality among men and women in the world of tourism.

Thank you for your attention.

Annex 3: Conference Programme

Day 1 - 16 November

- 10:00 – 10:25** **Opening Ceremony**
Moderator: Joanne Ng, Professional Emcee, Mistress-of-Ceremony
- Welcome and Opening remarks by YB Dato Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri, Minister, Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Malaysia (on-site) – her opening remarks are attached as *Annex 1*
 - Congratulatory remarks by Siriporn Rathie, Country Program Manager, UN Women We Empower Asia (live, virtual)
 - Opening remarks by Mr. Harry Hwang, Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific, UNWTO (on-site) – his opening remarks are attached as *Annex 3*
- 11.00 – 12:00** **High-level Panel on the Impact of Covid19 on Women in Tourism: Policies for Recovery through a Gendered Lens**
Moderator: Jessy Chahal, News Anchor, Bernama News Channel, Malaysia
- Dato' Sri Nancy Shukri, Minister, Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Malaysia (on-site)
 - Giri Adnyani, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, Indonesia (live, virtual)
 - Dawa Futi Sherpa, Former Ambassador of Nepal to Spain (on-site)
 - Pansy Ho, Vice-Chairperson and Secretary-General of Global Tourism Economy Forum, & Chairperson of Hong Kong Federation of Women
 - Reverend Sonja Hunter, Anglican Priest, of the All saints Anglican Church in Samoa & Former CEO, Samoa Tourism Office & Chairperson of the South Pacific Tourism (live, virtual)
- Q&A Discussion
- 12:00 –12:30** **Visual Story-telling: Tourism Recovery through a Gendered Lens Case studies and Best Practices**
Moderator: Joanne Ng, Professional Emcee, Mistress-of-Ceremony
- Mona Yang, a Korean doing her PhD on marginalised voices in tourism in Australia (live, virtual)
 - Prachi Thakur, an Indian postgraduate student working on her PhD on diversity in tourism (live, virtual)
- 14:00 –15:00** **Fireside Chat on Women's Employment, Entrepreneurship and Leadership in Tourism**
Moderator: Benjamin Owen, Ethics, Culture and Social Responsibility Department, UNWTO

- Aileen Clemente, President, Rajah Travel Corporation (live, virtual)
- Mar Pages, Co-founder, Solo Female Travellers, will focus on entrepreneurship (live, virtual)
- Sharihan Al Mashary, Expo2020 Commercial & Hospitality Senior Management| First Female Emirati General Manager (live, virtual)

Q&A discussion

- 15:30 – 16:30** **Invisible to Impact Workshop: Branding You for Work, Promotion and Business**
Facilitator: Dr Nisha Abu Bakar, Founder World Women Tourism (live, virtual)
- 16:30 – 17:00** **Powerful Partnerships Challenge**
Facilitator: Dr Catheryn Khoo, Expert on Gender and Tourism, UNWTO (live, virtual)
- 17:00 – 17:15** **Conclusions Day 1**
Dr Catheryn Khoo, Expert on Gender and Tourism in Asia and the Pacific, UNWTO (live, virtual)



Figure 1: The opening ceremony in Day 1

Day 2 - 17 November

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|----------------------|--|
| 10.30 – 11.30 | Data and Insights for an Inclusive Tourism Recovery
Moderator: Jessy Chahal, News Anchor, Bernama News Channel, Malaysia <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dhammika Wijayasinghe, Director General of Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (live, virtual) • Dr. Kumi Kato, Professor at Wakayama University, Japan (on-site) • Ma. Christina Aquino, Chairperson, Tourism Industry Board Foundation, Philippines (live, virtual) • Jacqueline Fong, CEO Tanoti Malaysia (live, virtual) |
| 11.30 – 12.00 | Trivia: Gender in Tourism Data
Facilitator: Dr Catheryn Khoo, Expert on Gender and Tourism, UNWTO (live, virtual) |
| 14.00 – 15.00 | Pecha Kucha: Education and Training for Women in Tourism
Moderator: Dr. Kumi Kato, Professor at Wakayama University, Japan (on-site) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alessandra Alonso, Founder, Women in Travel (live, virtual) • Dr Nisha Abu Bakar, Trainer, Singapore Tourism Board & Founder, World Women Tourism (live, virtual) • Dr Lucy Ferguson, Gender Training Expert (live, virtual) |
| 15.30 – 16.30 | HourClass: Co-create Unique Tourism Experiences
Facilitator: Dr Elaine Yang, Griffith University Australia (live, virtual) |
| 16.30 – 16.45 | Conference conclusions and recommendations
Dr. Catheryn Khoo, Expert on Gender and Tourism, UNWTO (live, virtual) |
| 16.40 – 17.00 | Closing Ceremony
Moderator: Joanne Ng, Professional Emcee, Mistress-of-Ceremony <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concluding remarks by Mr. Harry Hwang, Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific, UNWTO (on-site) • Closing remarks by Datuk Wira Dr Noor Zari Hamat, Secretary-General, Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Malaysia (on-site) |

Information on the speakers and moderators can be found in the Conference Brochure on the event website [here](#).