

Concept Note

Regional Conference on the Empowerment of Women in Tourism in Europe

Almaty, Kazakhstan
22-23 October 2025

I. Background

Tourism is not only one of the fastest-growing economic sectors in Europe, it is also a powerful driver of women's economic and social empowerment. According to the *Global Report on Women in Tourism, Second Edition*, women represent 54% of the world's tourism workforce, substantially higher than their share in the broader economy (39%). In Europe specifically, the accommodation & food services sub-sector reflects a similar trend, with women making up an estimated 53% of those employed.

Yet despite employing large numbers of women across the region, key gaps remain. Women in tourism tend to be concentrated in lower-paid, lower-skilled and informal roles; pay disparities are persistent, and advancement remains limited into leadership, entrepreneurship, and traditionally male-dominated industries for example, transportation, guiding in remote areas, technical roles. UN Tourism data underscores that while tourism narrows the wage gap somewhat—women in tourism earn “only” about 14.7% less than men, compared to about 16.8% in many other sectors—this is still far from full parity.

In Europe and Central Asia, although specific statistics are more fragmented, emerging evidence suggests similar patterns of both opportunity and obstacle. Data from Kazakhstan indicates that nearly 44% of small and medium-sized enterprises are now women-led, showing strong potential for entrepreneurship even under constraints. Yet structural barriers women face across the region remain significant, for instance limited access to finance, traditional gender stereotypes, and under-representation in leadership.

In addition, Central Asian women have increasingly turned to community-based approaches to empowerment - building networks, cooperatives, and mentorship groups that allow them to co-create, share knowledge, and implement tourism and creative industry projects together. These grassroots communities not only strengthen solidarity but also help women gain visibility, negotiate better conditions, and promote inclusive development models rooted in collaboration. Although this trend is still emerging and gradually gaining momentum across the region, it demonstrates a strong potential for long-term growth and deeper impact on women's economic participation and social leadership in the years to come.

This conference aims to deepen our understanding of how employment, entrepreneurship, and leadership opportunities for women in tourism can be expanded—particularly in industries and roles traditionally dominated by men. We will examine best practices, policy levers, training and education, and systemic innovations that can accelerate change. Only by elevating women into decision-making spaces, supporting female business ownership, and breaking occupational segregation, can European and Central Asian tourism fulfil its full promise as an engine for gender equality and sustainable development.

II. Panels

High-level Roundtable Discussion – Gender inequality in Tourism Leadership

Highlighting the achievements, acknowledging the barriers and recognizing the importance of networks for women's leadership in the tourism sector.

Despite women comprising 54% of the global tourism workforce, leadership roles remain predominantly male-dominated in both the private and public sectors. In the UN Tourism Europe region, women make up just 12%¹ of the tourism ministers of member states. This inequality at the highest echelons of tourism employment is seen similarly across the private sector, and around the world. This disparity persists despite women's strong presence in mid-level management and their growing educational attainment in tourism and hospitality fields.

Progress has been made towards closing the gender-gap in tourism leadership with governments beginning to implement gender-inclusive tourism strategies, leading to increased representation of women in decision-making roles. Furthermore, women-led tourism enterprises and community-based initiatives have gained visibility, particularly in rural and sustainable tourism sectors.

However, barriers to gender parity at the highest levels remain significant. These include limited access to capital, discrimination in hiring and promotion, unequal caregiving responsibilities, and a lack of mentorship opportunities. In addition, women are often found working in informal employment, which is common in tourism, reducing job security and advancement potential.

Networks and mentorship platforms are critical enablers to advance women's leadership in the sector. This roundtable discussion will celebrate the success of some of Europe's more formidable women leaders in tourism and consider the importance of peer support, knowledge exchange and policy advocacy for smashing the glass-ceiling in tourism once and for all.

Panel Discussion 1 – Challenging Stereotypes

Discussing strategies to facilitate women's access to traditionally gendered roles in tourism

Tourism employs large amounts of women worldwide and offers considerable opportunities for economic and social empowerment. However, women remain underrepresented in many roles within the tourism sector, such as transport, adventure and rural guiding, and technical operations.

Challenging the status quo requires targeted strategies that invest in skills training, while challenging stereotypes and marketing roles as an attractive career choice. Industry and governments have begun work to attract more women workers to these roles.

For example, in Kyrgyzstan, initiatives have successfully trained women as mountain guides, challenging historic gender norms. In aviation the IATA 25% by 2025 initiative has seen an increase in female representation across all roles in aviation amongst major airlines.

Policy incentives and public-private partnerships can drive change, and visibility matters. Campaigns that showcase female role models in male-dominated tourism jobs help shift public perception and encourage more women to enter these fields.

Finally, strengthening networks and peer support systems enables women to navigate occupational barriers, access mentorship, and advocate for equitable work conditions—critical steps toward inclusive tourism development across the region.

¹ The UN Tourism region of Europe comprises of 41 Member States from Europe and Central Asia. Full list available at <https://www.untourism.int/europe/members>

This panel will hear from some pioneering women working in male-dominated industries and consider the type of strategies that destinations and businesses can implement to foster a more equal representation.

Panel Discussion 2 – The Digital Divide in Tourism

Examining inequalities that exist in access to technology and digital skills and their impact on opportunities for women's empowerment

Digital transformation is reshaping the tourism sector, yet unequal access to technology and digital skills continues to marginalize women—particularly in rural and underserved areas of Europe and Central Asia. While internet penetration is relatively high in urban regions, rural women often face limited connectivity, lack of digital education, and cultural barriers to technology use.

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), women in Central Asia are 18% less likely than men to use the internet, with an even wider gap in digital entrepreneurship and e-commerce engagement. This digital divide restricts women's ability to market tourism services online, access training, or participate in digital platforms essential for modern tourism operations.

Bridging this divide requires integrated strategies. Digital literacy programs tailored to women—especially in rural and minority communities—are essential. In Tajikistan for example, public initiatives are boosting public service digitalization and empowering women entrepreneurs through training in digital literacy and support measures.

Industry aggregators and multimodal platforms can complement these efforts by lowering entry barriers to participation. User-friendly onboarding tools, mobile-first interfaces, and simplified integration processes enable even low-connectivity or low-tech providers to reach digital audiences. Inclusive design - *meeting women where they are digitally* - can accelerate participation in the tourism economy.

Access to digital payments and financial tools also remains a critical constraint. Without the ability to transact online, women-led tourism microenterprises - especially in rural areas - cannot benefit fully from digital demand. Partnerships between fintech firms, travel platforms, and local cooperatives could expand digital payment options and financial literacy, strengthening women's ability to participate in digital commerce.

Kazakhstan represents an encouraging case within the region, where digitalization efforts are already contributing to women's empowerment in tourism. The government's "Digital Kazakhstan" programme, coupled with a thriving fintech ecosystem, has created accessible digital services, online marketplaces, and e-learning opportunities. These developments have allowed many women in tourism - from artisans and guesthouse owners to tour operators - to promote their products and manage their businesses independently. Strengthening digital inclusion policies in other countries across Europe and Central Asia can build on this momentum and replicate Kazakhstan's positive outcomes.

Finally, bridging the digital divide requires cross-sector collaboration. Governments, tech companies, and travel platforms can work together to onboard rural women's cooperatives and local providers into global digital marketplaces. By combining connectivity, skills, and inclusive technology design, tourism can become a genuine driver of women's empowerment across Europe and Central Asia.

Panel Discussion 3 – Almaty Women take Centre Stage

Experiences and lessons learned from women shaping Kazakhstan's tourism landscape

Women's empowerment remains a key global development priority. Despite their substantial contributions to economic and social progress, women continue to face discrimination shaped by social norms, customs, and institutional barriers. Across most of the world, gender-based differences in earnings remain an urgent concern in tourism and the broader economy. Kazakhstan is no exception with men's average monthly income standing at approximately 30% higher than that of women in the period 2015 - 2022, reflecting broader structural inequalities.

In addition, a recent UNDP/UN Women report found that fewer than 40% of Kazakhstan citizens correctly understand key concepts such as "gender," "gender equality," or "women's rights and opportunities." The same report shows that a significant share of both men and women believe women already enjoy sufficient rights, even though traditional gender roles remain widely supported.

Recognizing the importance of reducing economic inequalities, Kazakhstan has taken steps to support women's participation in the economy. For example, the Centers for the Development of Women's Entrepreneurship were established under regional chambers of entrepreneurs in 2022. These centers provide women with guidance on business growth, as well as opportunities for personal and professional development.

Kazakhstan's entry into the UN Tourism 'Centre Stage' programme also marks a milestone for increased awareness of the need to work towards gender-equality in tourism. The programme brings together public institutions, tourism businesses and civil society to work together on concrete actions to identify and reduce existing inequalities between women and men in the tourism sector.

While Kazakhstan is made visible progress in advancing women's participation in the economy, persistent cultural stereotypes and structural inequalities continue to slow the achievement of full gender equality. Strengthening public understanding of gender equality and expanding initiatives that support women's leadership and entrepreneurship remain essential for sustainable progress.

Against this backdrop, this panel brings together leading women in Kazakhstan's tourism sector to offer powerful examples of change in action. By challenging stereotypes, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering inclusive communities, these women illustrate how empowerment begins at the individual level. Transforming not only their own professions but also the broader narrative of women's roles in society