



Exploring the career challenges of female tour guides in the Sri Lankan travel and tourism industry: Social Role Theory perspective

Ruwanthika Jayaweera

²University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

Received 12 October 2023

Revised 19 December 2023

Accepted 27 December 2023


Abstract

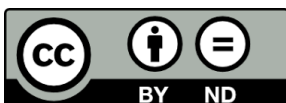
This paper aims to understand what barriers have resulted in the poor representation of female tour guides in the Sri Lankan travel and tourism industry. The study's design employed a qualitative approach to gain in-depth insights into the experiences of female tour guides, utilising thematic analysis as the analytical strategy. Three main themes emerged from the qualitative research findings of the interviewed female national tour guides: the feminine gender identity of female tour guides, the gender role of women, and gender stereotypes. Firstly, the feminine gender identity of female tour guides presents how femininity contradicts the tour guide's occupational role in the Sri Lankan context. Secondly, gender stereotypes prevalent in familial, work, and broader societal spheres hinder the success of female tour guides in their careers. Finally, socially constructed gender roles impose additional obstacles for women pursuing careers as tour guides. Consequently, these constraints impede women's fulfilment of their social role, creating a challenging atmosphere for being a female tour guide in Sri Lanka. This research suggested that it is the responsibility of government bodies to ensure equal opportunities for females to take up the tour guide occupation.

Keywords: Female tour guides, Tourism industry, Gender role, Social Role Theory

South Asian Journal of
Tourism and Hospitality
© Faculty of
Management Studies
Sabaragamuwa
University of Sri Lanka
ISSN: 2756-911X

*Corresponding author: jruwanthika@yahoo.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-2013-9630>



Articles in SAJTH are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows reusers to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form only so long as attribution is given to the creator.

INTRODUCTION

Today, the global travel and tourism industry's success heavily relies on female workers' contributions. Women have been empowered, paving the way for entrepreneurship, alongside the vast opportunities they have gained in the tourism sector (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019). According to statistics from the World Travel & Tourism Council (2022), more than half of the employment in the tourism sector comprises females. Notably, the female employment share aligns with the overall economy in the world's most extensive travel and tourism economies, such as the USA and China. Moreover, the proportion of women in travel and tourism in countries like Russia, Germany, South Africa, and South Korea exceeds 50% (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019).

With the rising trend of female-led tours, the importance placed on female tour guides has increased. The tour guide occupation aligns closely with the travel and tourism industry, as these individuals serve as front-line staff providing services to travellers. Despite women's significant contributions to the sector worldwide, female tour guides face challenges in specific contexts, including Sri Lanka (Mousa et al., 2023; Alrawadieh et al., 2023; Masadeh et al., 2018; Mudalige, 2021). Socio-cultural, religious, and discriminatory barriers have commonly been identified as triggering factors for the underrepresentation of female tour guides across the globe (Mousa et al., 2023; Alrawadieh et al., 2023; Oter & Sonuc, 2014).

The tourism industry plays a vital role in the Sri Lankan economy, contributing 6.1% to the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) and serving as a significant source of foreign exchange (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2022). Furthermore, Sri Lanka has been recognised as one of the best adventure destinations in Asia, attracting travellers from around the world (Lippe-McGraw, 2023). Despite the importance of the tourism industry to the Sri Lankan economy, the low participation of women in the tourism workforce is evident, with female tour guides becoming a focal point of underrepresentation (Kodagoda & Jayawardana, 2022; Silva & Mendis, 2017). According to the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (2018), there are 1425 licensed National Tour Guides (NTGs), with only 64 being female, accounting for

approximately 6% of all registered NTGs. However, only 10 female NTGs are active, underscoring the impact of socially constructed gender roles in Sri Lankan society on women's involvement in the tour guide profession. Hence, this research aims to understand the main career challenges behind women's lack of participation in the tour guide occupation.

The broader explanations of Social Role Theory are used to understand which social impediments pose challenges for female tour guides to access and sustain in the NTG occupation (hereafter referred to as SRT). Section 2 examines different theoretical concepts regarding women's career challenges in the travel and tourism industry and SRT. The paper explains the methods employed for the study in Section 3. Section 4 presents the key respondents' experiences to explore the research questions. The conclusions of the research study are in Section 5. Practical implications are included in section 6. Lastly, limitations and future research avenues are mentioned in section 07.

This paper makes several significant contributions. First, it expands and enriches the existing literature on the careers of women NTGs. This study represents an attempt, or at least a beginning, to bring this topic to the public agenda in Sri Lanka. Second, the existing literature needs empirical findings on social challenges for female NTGs in Sri Lanka. This study fills the gap in the literature by understanding the complex social factors that limit the influx of women tour guides to the field with the use of the SRT. This research expands the geographical scope of the literature. Third, the paper raises awareness of female NTGs' career challenges that hinder their socio-economic empowerment in developing nations. Finally, the paper recommends practical implications for relevant authorities in Sri Lanka.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women have significant opportunities in the growing travel and tourism industry, with increasing demand and equal opportunities. According to statistics from the World Travel & Tourism Council (2022), women constitute 54% of the workforce in the travel and tourism sector worldwide, nearly twice the number of women employed in other sectors. Similarly, regional reports on women in Tourism in Asia

and the Pacific regions indicate that women account for 52% of the tourism labour force in the Asian and Pacific areas of the world (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2022). Many women in the tour guide industry have found self-employment opportunities, enabling them to make a living in the sector (Tour guide industry statistics, 2023). Additionally, evidence indicates that women are stepping up to meet the growing demands, particularly in female-led tour guide services (Mackenzie et al., 2020). Given women's established presence in the expanding travel and tourism industry, it is essential to recognise their representation in various occupations within the sector.

Despite women's significant contributions to the global travel and tourism sector, their representation in the tour guide occupation varies across different regions. While women play an essential role in the travel and tourism industry, there are contexts where fewer opportunities exist for female tour guides. For instance, in the USA, approximately 53.2% of active tour guides are female, indicating a relatively higher representation (Tour Guide demographics and statistics in the US, n.d). However, in specific contexts like Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, and Sri Lanka, fewer females work as tour guides, presenting challenges and limiting opportunities (Mousa et al., 2023; Alrawadieh et al., 2023; Masadeh et al., 2018; Mudalige 2021). Moreover, empirical research provides evidence of how women tour guides can be empowered through well-conceptualized and designed training programs to mitigate their career challenges (Vij et al., 2023; Sumanapala et al., 2023).

Religious beliefs, particularly those associated with Islam, often pose challenges to women's career choices in certain societies. Despite their interest in contributing to the travel and tourism industry, women's aspirations are usually curtailed by solid Islamic beliefs. Religious beliefs regarding the role of women in society can impose barriers to women's mobility, with the notion that a female's mobility should accompany a male as a limiting factor (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). Additionally, the wearing of the hijab, or veil, is viewed as an expression of Muslim identity. Still, it can also hinder women from being selected as tour guides, as seen in Jordan (Masaden et al., 2018). They state that Muslim women may face rejection from tour agencies due to their use of the veil, with selection for the position of a female

tour guide perceived as purely fortunate.

Sexual harassment is another prevalent key issue in the travel and tourism industry, affecting women employees across various settings such as hotels, restaurants, and airlines (Kensbock et al., 2015; Weber et al., 2002; Węziak-Białowolska et al., 2020). The nature of the industry, with its long working hours, fluctuating shifts, and highly gendered environment, contributes to the prevalence of sexual harassment, leading to lower job satisfaction, psychological distress, and burnout among female tour guides (Mousa et al., 2023; Alrawadieh et al., 2023). In addition to the religious and harassment issues in the industry, women also face challenges due to the broader role they play in society.

Women's social role in society presents significant challenges for female tour guides. Social and cultural norms dictate women's roles in the family, often hindering their opportunities to work as tour guides. Marital status may require women to seek permission from their spouses to engage in paid labour, while the demands of motherhood can disadvantage women in the workplace (Oter & Sonuc, 2014). The conflicting nature of the tour guide occupation, with its long hours and intensive job duties, may also contradict socially expected roles for women, leading some to prioritise family obligations over their careers (Mousa et al., 2023; Masadeh et al., 2018).

According to the SRT, the broader socialisation processes have formed the gender roles expected of women in certain societies (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Accordingly, women are supposed to be the prime responsibility of the domestic sphere, including caring for their children in the family in certain societies. Align to this gender role of society. Still, many Indian women prioritise homemaking and childcare over employment roles (Mitra & Knottnerous, 2008). The social and economic opportunities for women in the tourism industry have been hindered by socially constructed gender roles (Bakas & Salman, 2024; Ghaderi et al., 2023). In addition to the socially constructed gender role in society, females are also supposed to play various social roles in two main spheres: work and family. When performing social roles, one's gender identity and gender stereotypes are considered the two most

influential social factors. Firstly, gender identities are considered the standards of behaviour for males and females in society (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Primarily, females are identified with the feminine gender identity, and males are identified as having the masculine gender identity. For example, one's feminine gender identity is reflected in the thoughts that a woman is responsible for a clean and tidy house. There is evidence that women tour guides take advantage of feminine gender identity, for example, feminine beauty (Wang & Xu, 2018; Oter & Sonuc, 2014). Moreover, women tour guides have also reported that their clients have specifically selected them because of their perceptions of the gentle nature of women (Mackenzie et al., 2020). Secondly, gender stereotypes in society are reflected in one's preconceptions of the roles of men and women in society. If one's behaviour deviates from the socially accepted behaviour or gender stereotype in society, then such behaviour is penalised (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Whenever the behaviour aligns with the gender stereotypes in society, society will reward such behaviour. Due to the parenting role of women, working mothers are considered less nurturing, less professionally competent, and commuted to occupations (Fuegen et al., 2004). Moreover, social sanctions are waiting for women tour guides if they are noticed with any loopholes in performing the duties to the husband, parents and dependents (Mousa et al., 2023). A research study on women tour guides has found that the gender stereotype of women making sexual relationships with male coworkers fails to improve their social status or gender identity in society (Bouhmid, 2023). Moreover, gender stereotypes have resulted in a gendered division of labour in society and partial productivity of women in the tourism industry of Turkey (Bakas & Salman, 2024). In contrast, there is evidence that women's take-up of the tour guide occupation is positively taken by society and that social appreciation itself has become a motivating factor in serving in the tour guiding field (Yuni et al., 2023).

Despite the significant contribution of the tourism industry to the growth of the Sri Lankan economy, there is an underrepresentation of women tour guides, the frontline service providers in this sector. Gender-related factors have been identified as influencing women tour guides' career choices (Mudalige, 2021). However, there is no evidence from the Sri Lankan context regarding how the social role of women creates career challenges for female NTGs, hindering their active participation in the travel

and tourism industry of Sri Lanka.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research approach to gain deep insights into the challenges encountered by female tour guides in the Sri Lankan travel and tourism industry. Research questions with a qualitative inclination and research problems of a qualitative nature could benefit from qualitative inquiry (Dewasiri et al., 2018). Accordingly, the researcher's desire to understand the career challenges contributing to the underrepresentation of women tour guides in Sri Lanka is qualitative. Furthermore, the comprehension of the career challenges women tour guides face cannot be quantified; instead, understanding is required through human interactions. Hence, both the research problem and research questions formulated in the study necessitate using a qualitative approach. The sample comprised seven active female NTGs in Sri Lanka. The count of registered female NTGs is 64; out of that number, around 10 female NTGs are active. Therefore, the sample reflects seven NTGs out of ten active female NTGs in the country. Finding female NTGs proved challenging due to the small number of active female NTGs despite a more significant registered number. However, the snowball sampling was employed to reach the required sample size. Appointments were scheduled with the female NTGs via phone, and their consent was obtained before the interviews. They were briefed about the research, confidentiality, and anonymity procedures. Interviews were conducted at a time convenient for the NTGs, typically after they completed their tours, to ensure their comfort and engagement. The interviews lasted nearly one and a half hours for each participant. The extended duration of the interviews was due to the participants' informative nature and willingness and availability to be interviewed. Participants' consent was obtained to record their voices for research purposes. Immediately after the interviews, the researcher began taking notes of the critical points in a diary labelled with the participant's name. Subsequently, the researcher referred to the audio recordings to transcribe the interviews. The interview transcriptions were later translated into English. The participants' real names were anonymised, and the transcripts were coded to identify emerging themes. Initially, the researcher coded all the transcripts, after which categories were identified from the coded data.

Subsequently, the identified categories were linked to discern emerging themes. Finally, relevant themes that addressed the study's research question were selected. Data saturation was achieved after interviewing seven female tour guides, indicating that no new themes emerged. Thematic analysis, precisely the six-phase method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to analyse the data and identify critical themes addressing the research problem.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results obtained from interviews conducted with female NTGs. The research findings are organised into three main themes: Gender identity of female tour guides, Gender stereotypes, and Gender role of women in society. Firstly, the gender identity of female tour guides illustrates how the feminine gender identity of women in society causes them to feel disconnected from the traditionally masculinised tour guide occupation. Secondly, widespread gender stereotypes within society result in societal disapproval or social sanctions against female tour guides. Thirdly, the socially constructed gender role in society creates barriers to the performance of their occupational roles. All three key themes align to underscore the challenges faced by female tour guides in the tour guide occupation within society.

The gender identity of female tour guides

The feminine gender identity of females poses various challenges when performing their tour guide occupation. The masculine gender identity, characterised by traits such as competitiveness and less focus on self-image, is more aligned with the demands of the tour guide occupation in Sri Lanka's travel and tourism industry. As a result, the feminine gender identity of females is perceived as a hindrance to their successful takeover of the tour guide occupation. This perception is perpetuated by society at large, where femaleness associated with women tour guides is often taken for granted.

Female national tour guides encounter numerous barriers from the tour

agencies they are affiliated with solely because of their femaleness linked to their feminine gender identity. Primarily, these female tour guides become less competitive than their male counterparts in the industry, as females are less likely to engage in bribery with tour executives. Additionally, female tour guides are marginalised within tour organising companies, as tour executives receive different fringe financial or non-financial benefits from male tour guides. The experience of NTG 02 exemplifies this, as she found herself in an embarrassing situation due to the bribery-oriented behaviour of both male tour guides and travel executives. Consequently, she faced pressure and demands from both parties during her tour, as illustrated by her story.

“When I had already taken my tour and just started the briefing session, I got a call from one of the travel executives. By then, one of the male tour guides bribed that travel executive to remove me from the tour. So, I got instructions to leave the tour and return to the office immediately, telling me he got some complaints about me from the clients.”

NTG 05 also shared her insights regarding the challenges she faced due to the subpar service quality of the tour executives in the companies she worked for. Her explanations shed light on how women were marginalised due to the bribery-oriented behaviour of these tour executives. Due to a perceived lack of competitiveness, female tour guides often find themselves at a disadvantage. Moreover, NTG 05 revealed that female tour guides were only included in tours if requested explicitly by international agents. Her comments underscore the less competitive nature of female tour guides within the broader travel and tourism industry.

“One thing is we do not take tours for money. The other thing is we are not prepared to take tour executives for dinners or anything else. Then they try to limit our tours. They prefer to give a chance to someone giving them a benefit, maybe for money or something else. A woman would rarely get a chance. They will appear in tours only if someone specifically mentions them”.

Despite being entitled to a hotel room while performing their duties, female tour guides in Sri Lanka encounter challenges as many tour guide agencies and hotels attempt to

cut down on this entitlement. The explanations of NTG 07 highlight how hotels make it inconvenient for them by harshly deciding to cut down on their accommodation upon their arrival. This challenges the self-image of Sri Lankan females, which is linked to the traditional feminine gender identity.

“Hotels go for low rates when they offer accommodation for the corporate sector. The guide room is available when we check over the phone before we check in. However, if they get any inquiry from a local or another party, they usually give away the guide room at a higher rate than offered to the tour agency. Then, the room available in the morning was unavailable when we tried to check in in the evening. We will be requested to go for their staff accommodation rooms or small-scale places outside the hotel. I have argued many times with the hoteliers for being unfair to a lady like that way.”

In addition to hotels cutting down on their accommodation, female tour guides also need help with the issue of their accommodation being taken by employees within the company. Staff attached to the tour agency often grab the accommodation whenever they require it for personal use. Consequently, these staff members direct female tour guides to use alternative accommodations outside the hotel. NTG 01 recounted an incident where she felt embarrassed due to her entitled room being taken by staff from her company. She revealed how she opted to escape from the unsuitable accommodation offered to her to maintain her self-image.

“This incident happened when I had to go on a tour to Kandy. When I tried to check in, I was informed by the company staff that it had been taken and directed to a nearby place outside the hotel. It was night then. When I checked that place, there were many prostitutes and drunken people all over. Then I returned with my driver to the hotel again and had to stay my night in the lobby.”

The femaleness of female tour guides is often overlooked by people, leading to disappointment. In addition to conducting tours, tour guides also earn income from commissions for successful business transactions with foreigners. However, the

corporate sector has been reported to exploit female tour guides solely to promote their businesses. Furthermore, the tour agency sometimes takes their commission income. NTG 03 expressed her disappointment with the situation, highlighting how the tour agency seized her business opportunities, undermining her identity as a female in society.

“I am very good at doing business. I know how to promote business to foreigners. In the middle of promoting the business. We promote business when foreigners are at leisure. Then the company says you go home for three days and come only on the last day. So, people from the office reached these foreigners during those days and did their gem business for the foreigners whom I promoted. In this way, they take my commission income. If it is not a person from the office, it can be another guide or an outsider.”

Gender stereotypes

One of the primary obstacles female tour guides face is the pervasive gender stereotypes surrounding the tour guide profession in Sri Lanka. According to accounts from female tour guides, many women encounter this barrier within their family, workplace, and broader societal contexts. When women deviate from societal expectations regarding gender stereotypes, they often face penalties from society. The following section delves into how societal stereotypes about gender roles present challenges for female tour guides within their family domain.

The explanation of NTG 03 shed light on how her parents strongly disapproved of their daughter pursuing a career as a tour guide. This occupation's prevailing societal stereotype significantly influenced her parents' negative attitude. NTG 03 detailed how her family placed obstacles in her career path and expressed their disapproval of her decision to pursue this particular job, stating:

“The very first barrier in this occupation came from my family. My mother was not happy at all. There is an angle through which Sri Lankans look at the tour guide occupation. Most of them think this job is not suitable for females.

The first myth is that foreigners are not good. My mother disapproved of me, while two uncles of mine also worked in the same field.”

NTG 04 also shared her challenges in persuading her family to support her pursuit of her dream job. The prevailing gender stereotypes within society, which suggest that the tour guide occupation is not suitable for females, influenced her parents' decision-making process. NTG 04 elaborated on this dynamic within her family, stating

“My family did not like me doing this job because I am a girl. Then I have to go out. Need to travel. They think travelling and going out are not suitable for a female. My father was strongly opposed to this. We had no family relations connected to this field. So, it was tough for me to get permission to register for this course.”

Given that this stereotype about the tour guide occupation is ingrained in the broader society, numerous incidents have been reported where barriers to job performance have arisen from the general public. Society often exhibits disapproving behaviour towards female tour guides, which can make their job challenging. NTG 01 recounted incidents where she felt uncomfortable due to society's disapproval. She described feeling frowned upon by her villagers when she disembarked from the bus late at night. She revealed experiencing social rejection due to gender stereotypes in society, explaining:

“It becomes late night when I finish off some of my tours. So, if I had to get down from the village bus station, people stare at me like I was a person who was doing the wrong job. It hurts me.”

NTG 06 also shared her discomfort when utilising public transportation to fulfil her job responsibilities. She explained how people would stare at her, viewing her actions as unusual. This behaviour made her uncomfortable, hindering her ability to perform her role effectively.

“In some places, I do not know why some people just stare at me like they will

swallow me. That happened to me mostly on train journeys and other public places. Yeah, mostly in public transportation”.

In addition to facing gender stereotypes within their families and society, female tour guides also encounter such stereotypes in the organisational domain. A primary concern for female tour guides is the lack of confidence in their ability to perform the tour guide occupation compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, it has been observed that females are less likely to be given opportunities to start their careers in this field. This disparity can be attributed to societal gender stereotypes surrounding the capabilities and potential of female tour guides in the industry. NTG 03 highlighted the hardships she endured while building her career, illustrating:

“In this field, we only get a salary if we do a tour. We do not get a monthly salary. Initially, it was tough for a lady to find a job. Because few female tour guides are in the field, they do not believe a lady can do a tour, too.”

Gender roles of women in the society

The socially constructed gender roles of women have created numerous barriers for females pursuing careers as tour guides. Within the family domain, women's gender roles are often centred around their roles as mothers, wives, or sisters, which can pose contradictions when pursuing a career as a tour guide. One female tour guide shared the experience of a colleague who had to pause her job for a considerable period due to the demands of motherhood. However, she revealed that her friend could rejoin the workforce once her children were older and motherhood no longer interfered with her occupation as a tour guide.

“My friend who worked with me was in the field only up to her delivery. After that point, she stopped working for more than five years. Yeah, she took a long career break. She could come back to work only when her children became grown-ups”. (NTG 02)

NTG 05 shared her perspective on the future of her career. She expressed that she has no plans to continue working after her marriage. Consequently, she is laying the groundwork to divert from her occupation. Despite being initially a female tour guide, she revealed that she works as a yoga instructor. This shift is primarily motivated by the desire to conform to the socially accepted role of a wife. She elaborated on how her occupational role contradicted societal gender norms, explaining:

“I have worked as a female tour guide for years and gained many things. However, now I have decided to change my career as a yoga instructor. I think now it is time to think about my marriage life. No one will accept a lady who is always away from home.”

In addition to adhering to gender roles within the family, female tour guides also encounter barriers from gender roles within their professional domain. There exist perceptions regarding the subordinate or secondary role women are expected to play in their occupational sphere. NTG 03 described the dominant influence of males in Sri Lanka, particularly senior male tour guides. She recounted instances where senior male colleagues attempted to undermine her opportunities when given the chance to lead a tour. She revealed how they argued and resisted when the tour guiding company assigned her to lead a tour, illustrating the challenges female tour guides face in navigating a male-dominated industry.

“This incident happened to me as soon as I joined the company. At that time, I was a very young lady, and nobody believed in my skills and abilities to work as a tour guide. There were a lot of well-experienced, senior male tour guides. When I first got an opportunity to cater a luxury tour, they showed their strong resistance to the company officials to remove me from such an important tour.”

NTG 04 highlighted the frequent turnover of tour executives within the company. Due to this turnover, newly recruited male tour executives often need more awareness of the capabilities of female tour guides in terms of their skills and abilities to perform the job. Consequently, this situation within the company leads female tour

guides to encounter significant inconvenience and difficulties in carrying out their duties, thereby limiting their opportunities for advancement.

“Tour executives change from time to time, and very rarely do they stay long. When newcomers join, they do not believe in our skills and abilities. So, they tend to give more chances to male tour guides. We get chances only if we are lucky.”

Discussion on women tour guides social role in society.

In this research, the researcher identified the career challenges females face in aspiring to enter the NTG occupation in Sri Lanka. The study highlighted how women's gender identity, societal gender roles, and gender stereotypes contribute to the challenges encountered by NTGs in the Sri Lankan travel and tourism industry. SRT is a theoretical lens through which to comprehend women tour guides' socially constructed career challenges.

Firstly, the feminine gender identity of women NTGs is often perceived negatively about their performance in the NTG occupation. Many tour guide agencies perceive that the feminine gender identity does not align with the requirements of the NTG occupation. However, other countries have capitalised on the opportunities available for women tour guides by valuing attributes such as feminine beauty (Wang & Xu, 2018; Oter & Sonuc, 2014).

Secondly, the socially constructed gender roles in society pose significant challenges for women in NTG occupations. Women's roles as mothers and wives often hinder their access and sustainability in NTG occupations. Empirical research findings on Egyptian female tour guides have illustrated how familial obligations limit their entry into the tour guide occupation (Mousa et al., 2023). Additionally, the demanding nature of the tour guide role, with its long and irregular working hours, adversely affects women's participation in the occupation (Mousa et al., 2023; Alrawadieh et al., 2023).

Thirdly, women tour guides frequently encounter negative gender stereotypes about women in the NTG occupation from broader society. These women often face social disapproval and sanctions for their career choice and being active in the tour guide occupation. A study conducted in the Sri Lankan context has found the discouraging nature of females in the tourism industry due to the negative cultural beliefs about the sexual harassment that can happen to women (Silva & Mendis, 2017). Further, society imposes expectations on women tour guides to fulfil duties to their husbands, parents, and dependents, and they will be penalised if not (Mousa et al., 2023).

The three main themes of women's gender identity, societal gender roles, and gender stereotypes reflect the idealised social role of women in society, suggesting their subordinate position in family and organisational contexts. As the societal role of women contradicts the tour guide's occupational role, women NTGs often encounter challenges at various stages of their careers.

CONCLUSIONS

Understanding the challenges that have resulted in relatively few female tour guides in the Sri Lankan travel and tourism industry is paramount to mitigate the pitfalls of this economically advantageous sector for the Sri Lankan economy. The qualitative research findings revealed several vital themes underpinning these challenges, namely the gender identity of female tour guides, societal gender stereotypes, and the gender roles of females in society. The theoretical framework of SRT was employed to provide a comprehensive explanation of how these factors have hindered the careers of female tour guides.

Accordingly, the feminine gender identity of females presents difficulties in fitting into the tour guide occupation in Sri Lanka. Gender stereotypes prevalent in society create obstacles for females in the tour guide field, as they face social sanctions if they do not conform to these stereotypes. Moreover, the socially constructed gender roles of females in society often prioritise familial responsibilities over job roles, further hindering female tour guides' performance in their occupational roles.

Therefore, the performance of female tour guides in society is impeded by the cumulative effect of societal gender roles, feminine gender identity, and gender stereotypes. Addressing these challenges is crucial for promoting gender equality and fostering the inclusion of women in the tour guide profession in Sri Lanka.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study highlights several practical implications that Sri Lankan policymakers should consider when making decisions. Firstly, there should be efforts to raise awareness among Sri Lankans about the availability of a tourism-related national occupation. This awareness campaign can be implemented at various levels, including schools, universities, and through mass media channels. Educating people about the nature of the job role and the advantages of engaging in a national job is crucial. By breaking societal stereotypes, we can anticipate a change in society's attitudes towards this profession and an increase in the future influx of female labour into this field.

Secondly, the Sri Lanka Tourist Board, as the essential governing body of tourism in Sri Lanka, is responsible for enhancing opportunities for women to enrol in the NTG occupation. The Board should prioritise supporting and respecting women entering this industry, ensuring fair treatment and equal opportunities in enrollment.

Thirdly, the governing body of Sri Lankan tourism should leverage the feminine identity to promote the growth of Sri Lankan tourism, following the strategies adopted by other countries. Instead of considering feminine identity as unsuitable for the tour guiding occupation, it should be embraced and highlighted, emphasising women's feminine beauty, communication skills, and interpersonal abilities as assets in the tourism sector.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

There were several constraints on the research design of this paper. Firstly, the qualitative nature of the research design does not aim to generalise the research

findings. Additionally, despite a significant number of registered female tour guides in Sri Lanka, there were only ten active female tour guides. Consequently, the researcher had a small sample size due to the limited availability of active registered female NTGs in Sri Lanka.

It is suggested to investigate why the gender identity of Sri Lankan women is not utilised to penetrate the tourism industry in Sri Lanka as in other countries. Furthermore, exploring possible ways of leveraging the Sri Lankan feminine gender identity to enhance tourism in Sri Lanka could be beneficial. Finally, this research could be applied to other contexts to gain further insights into how the broader social role of women in society influences their career behaviour.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to express sincere appreciation for the reviewers' invaluable comments and the women national tour guides who have helped by providing the necessary information required to complete this study. Their insights and suggestions have played a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of this paper, bringing it to a level suitable for publication.

REFERENCES

- Al-Asfour, A., Tlaiss, H.A., Khan, S.A., and Rajasekar, J. (2017). Saudi women's work challenges and barriers to career advancement. *Career Development International*, 22(2),184-199.
- Alrawadieh, Z., Alrawadieh, D. D., Olya, H. G., Bayram, G. E., & Kahraman, O. C. (2023). Sexual harassment, psychological well-being, and job satisfaction of female tour guides: The effects of social and organisational support. In *Gender and Tourism Sustainability* (pp. 186-204). Routledge.
- Bakas, F., & Salman, D. (2024). 'You ensure your safety': gender, fear and tourism labour in the gig economy in Türkiye. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2024.2327999>

- Bouhmid, K. (2023). Gendered tourism: Moroccan female workers in the local tourism industry. *Tourism Culture & Communication*, 23(4), 347-355.
- Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology, *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Dewasiri, N. J., Weerakoon, Y. K. B., & Azeez, A. A. (2018). Mixed methods in finance research: The rationale and research designs. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 17(1), 1609406918801730.
- Eagly, A. H., & Wood, W. (2012). Social role theory. *Handbook of theories of social psychology*, 2, 458-476.
- Fuegen, K., Biernat, M., Haines, E., & Deaux, K. (2004). Mothers and fathers in the workplace: How gender and parental status influence judgments of job-related competence. *Journal of Social Issues*, 60(4), 737-754.
- Ghaderi, Z., Tavakoli, R., Bagheri, F., & Pavee, S. (2023). The role of gender equality in Iranian female tourism entrepreneurs' success. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 48(6), 925-939.
- Kensbock, S., Bailey, J., Jennings, G., and Patiar, A. (2015). Sexual harassment of women working as room attendants within 5-star hotels. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 22(1), 36-50.
- Kodagoda, T., and Jayawardhana, S. (2022). Forced or voluntary reluctance or voluntary preference to work? Women in the hotel industry: evidence from Sri Lanka, *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 37(04), 524-534
- Lippe-McGraw, J. (2023, June 29). *Sri Lanka Is Asia's best-kept secret For Unforgettable Adventures*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jordilippemcgraw/2023/06/29/sri-lanka-is-asias-best-kept-secret-for-unforgettable-adventures/?sh=3e8004a24a11>
- Mackenzie, S.H., Boudreau, P., and Raymond, E. (2020). Women's adventure tour guiding experiences: Implications for well-being. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 45, 410-418.
- Masadeh, M., Al-Ababneh, M., Al-Sabi, S., and Allah, M.H. (2018). Female tourist guides in Jordan: Why so few. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 56(2), 89-102.
- Mitra, A., and Knottnerus, J.D. (2008). Sacrificing women: A study of ritualised practices among women volunteers in India. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 19, 242-267.

- Mousa, M., Abdelgaffar, H., Salem, I. E., Elbaz, A. M., & Chaouali, W. (2023). Religious, contextual and media influence: determinants of the representation of female tour guides in travel agencies. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 35(9), 3172-3192.
- Mudalige, T.A.K. (2021). Identifying the Triggering Factors for Female Career Choice: The Case of Tour Guide in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Business Administration and Languages (JBAL)*, 9(1), 72-86.
- Oter, Z., & Sonuc, N. (2014, November). Cultural heritage interpretation in gender context: Case of female tourist guides in Turkey. Paper presented at the *Proceedings of the Heritage, Tourism and Hospitality International Conference*, Istanbul, Turkey.
- Silva, D., and Mendis, B. A. K. M. (2017). Women in the tourism industry–Sri Lanka, *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and Sports*, 25, 65-72.
- Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. (2018). Annual statistical report. Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=Sri+Lanka+Tourism+development+authority.+%282018%29.+Annual+statistical+report+>
- Sumanapala, D., Wolf, I. D., & Weiler, B. (2023). Enhancing Tour Guide Training for Delivering Nature-Based Tourism Experiences in a Developing Country. *Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism*, 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1528008X.2023.2253561>
- Tour Guide demographics and statistics in the US. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.zippia.com/tour-guide-jobs/demographics/>
- Tour guide industry statistics. (2023). Retrieved from <https://blog.gitnux.com/tour-guide-industry-statistics/>
- Vij, M., Upadhyaya, A., Agha, K., Begum, V., Kashmoola, B. W., & Senior, J. R. (2023). Female economic empowerment through tourism training in the United Arab Emirates. *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, 15(1), 18-28.
- Wang, H., and Xu, H. (2018). Gender strategies at work: Informal female tour guides in Yangshuo West Street. *Journal of China Tourism Research*, 14(4), 524-540.
- Weber, J., Coats, W., Agrusa, J., Tanner, J., and Meche, M. (2002). Sexual harassment in the hospitality industry: Perceptions of restaurant employees. *Journal of Human Resources in Hospitality & Tourism*, 1(1), 75-93.
- Węziak-Białowolska, D., Białowolski, P., Mordukhovich, I., and McNeely, E. (2020). Work, gender, and sexual harassment on the frontlines of commercial travel: A cross-sectional study of flight crew well-being. *The International Journal of Aerospace Psychology*, 30(3-4), 171-189.

- World Travel and Tourism Council. (2019). travel & tourism: Driving women's success <https://wttc.org/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2019/Social%20Impact-Driving%20Womens%20Success-Mar%202019.pdf?ver=2021-02-25-182742-097>
- World Travel and Tourism Council. (2022). Travel and Tourism, Economic Impact 2022 <https://wttc.org/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2022/EIR2022-Global%20Trends.pdf>
- Yuni, L.K.H.K., Putra, I.N.D., Budiarsa, M., Sari, N.P.R., Sudiarta, I.N. and Subadra, I.N. (2023). Investigating the Motivations of Balinese Women Working as Tour Guides in Bali—a World Cultural Tourism Destination. *resmilitaris*, 13(3), 2423-2441.