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The gendered effects of statecraft on women in tourism: Economic sanctions, women's disempowerment and sustainability?

Siamak Seyfi^{a*}, *C. Michael Hall*^{bcd,e}, *Tan Vo-Thanh*^f

^a Geography Research Unit, University of Oulu, Finland

^b Department of Management, Marketing and Entrepreneurship, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

^c School of Business and Economics, Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden

^d Department of Geography, University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland

^e School of Tourism & Hospitality, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

^f Excelia Business School, CERIM & CEREGE (EA 1722)

Siamak Seyfi: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2427-7958>

C. Michael Hall: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7734-4587>

Tan Vo-Thanh: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9964-3724>

*** Corresponding Author:**

Siamak Seyfi
siamak.seyfi@oulu.fi

Authors bios:

Siamak Seyfi is an Assistant Professor at the Geography Research Unit of the University of Oulu, Finland. Using an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach, his research interests focus on tourism politics and geopolitics with a primary focus on the MENA region, political and ethical consumerism, resilience, as well as qualitative sociological/ethnographic research methods in tourism.

C. Michael Hall is a Professor in the Department of Management, Marketing and Entrepreneurship at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand; Docent, Department of Geography, University of Oulu, Finland; and Visiting Professor, School of Business and Economics, Linnaeus University, Kalmar. He publishes widely on tourism, sustainability, global environmental change and regional development.

Tan Vo-Thanh is an Associate Professor at Excelia Business School. His main research interests include sustainable tourism, tourist engagement, relationship quality, impacts of ICT on consumer behaviors and management, tourism destination attractiveness and competitiveness, wine tourism, and green human resource management.

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Abstract

Despite sanctions being one of the most common and far-reaching forms of economic statecraft, there is a notable absence of research on the gendered effects of economic sanctions on women's empowerment in general, and more particularly in relation to tourism. This is surprising given that the burden of economic sanctions is overwhelmingly felt by women due to their vulnerable socio-economic and political status in targeted countries. Drawing upon a disciplinary base in international relations and political science and using a gendered lens via a series of interviews, this study sought to explore the gendered effects of economic sanctions on Iranian women's empowerment in the country's tourism and hospitality industry. The study's findings indicate that sanctions have negatively affected and deteriorated economic, psychological, social and political aspects of women empowerment. The results highlight the vulnerability of empowerment within the religio-patriarchal society of Iran. As such economic empowerment is recognized as a major contributor to the overall empowerment of women in Iran which is therefore severely affected by sanctions. Overall, this study fills a significant gap in tourism research by highlighting the gendered implications of a ubiquitous state tool of coercive diplomacy and foreign policy and its effects on women's empowerment.

Keywords

Economic sanctions, coercive diplomacy, women's empowerment, disempowerment, gender, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

1. Introduction

Economic statecraft is the use of economic means and resources to exert influence and pressure in pursuit of foreign policy objectives (Baldwin, 1985). Described as "the precision-guided munitions of economic statecraft" (Drezner, 2011, p.96) sanctions have increasingly become a ubiquitous blunt tool of coercive diplomacy and foreign policy used by states and international actors seeking to influence the behaviors of a target state or political actor (Leyton-Brown, 2017). In the aftermath of the Cold War, sanctions have widely been viewed as 'a lower-cost, lower-risk', and middle option between diplomacy and war (Masters, 2019).

Sanctions take a number of different forms and measures, ranging from comprehensive economic and trade sanctions to more targeted measures (smart sanctions) such as asset freezes, travel bans, financial or commodity restrictions, raising of customs tariffs, and arms embargo (UN Security Council, 2020). Nonetheless, this 'carrot-and-stick' approach in diplomacy and foreign policy (Hall, 2005) is often criticized for their devastating impacts on human rights and the well-being of civilian populations. Hatipoglu and Peksen (2018) argue that sanctions may have painful consequences for a target country's elites, and its economic and political stability,

by triggering financial crisis and economic hardship. However, rather than emasculating the elites, they instead cause proportionately far greater damage to the livelihoods of the more vulnerable members of society, especially women and children, owing to their often already vulnerable socioeconomic and political status in target countries (Buck, Gallant, & Nossal, 1998; Drury & Peksen, 2014; Gutmann, Neuenkirch, & Neumeier, 2019). The social and political instability ensuing from sanctions may therefore lead to greater violation of women's political and social rights, further hindering their empowerment and the contributions they can make to inclusive and sustainable development (Cole, 2006; Boluk, Cavaliere, & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2019; Alarcón & Cole, 2019). This has previously been addressed by global institutions and initiatives, such as the third Millennium Development Goal (MDG3) and, in tourism, by the UNWTO's (2019) global report on women in tourism. Women's equality and empowerment is enshrined in goal 5 of 17 SDGs (UN Women, 2020), although it is also intrinsic and critical to the achievement of all 17 SDGs (Alarcón & Cole, 2019; Boluk et al., 2019).

Economic and financial crises have a disproportionate impact on women and the vulnerable in a society (Ruggieri, 2010; Piazzalunga & Di Tommaso, 2019) and further disempower women already affected by structural economic and cultural inequalities (Padgett & Warnecke, 2011). Sanctions are significant as they imply a deliberate attempt to cause economic hardship as part of regime change (Drezner, 2011). They are undertaken by the same governments and institutions that support the SDGs and the empowerment of women. However, the connections between policies that deliberately create economic and financial hardship and those that are aimed to respond to such difficulties and their gendered implications, is virtually missing in the analysis of sanctions.

Despite the growing number of studies on tourism and women's empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999, Cole, 2006; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012; Moswete & Lacey, 2014; Ramos & Prideaux, 2014; Farahani & Dabbaghi, 2018; Alarcón & Cole, 2019; Figueroa-Domecq et al, 2020), significant gaps remain with respect to the political and socioeconomic conditions of countries where tourism is an economic development strategy and the often marginalized status of women in politics and policy-making. Furthermore, little research attention has been given to the gendered consequences of sanctions on tourism and its relation to women's empowerment, with the existing literature largely being either gender-blind or gender-neutral. Arguably, such issues also reflect the wider under researched role of gender in the global financial and economic policy architecture (Ruggieri, 2010). In the case of tourism studies, although the gender domain is recognized as "a critical arena for action to attain sustainable development" (Boluk et al., 2019, p.852), tourism scholars have not included the impacts of sanctions in their empirical investigations and gendered-focused analysis of sanctions has been absent in the wider scholarship. In addition to a paucity of research on gender-specific effects of sanctions and women's empowerment within a tourism context, their relationships to the SDGs has also been neglected in the literature.

Drawing upon the theoretical framework of empowerment developed by Scheyvens (1999, 2000), this study sought to explore how economic sanctions have affected the different aspects

of women's empowerment in Iran in a tourism context. Iran, which is subject to one of the longest and strongest sanctions regimes in history, provides an interesting case to explore such interrelationships given the already strongly gendered nature of tourism and hospitality in the country (Farahani & Dabbaghi, 2018) and its religio-patriarchal society and masculinized political culture (Shahidian, 2002). This study is also very timely given the reimposition of sanctions by the USA in 2018 against Iran after a short spell of relaxation in the light of Iran's nuclear deal (2015-2017) and the potential implications for the country's tourism industry which witnessed a dramatic growth after the temporary lifting of sanctions (Seyfi & Hall, 2018).

The paper begins with an overview of economic statecraft and its relations to tourism and its gendered consequences. This is also contextualized by discussion of theoretical approaches to women's empowerment. The research design is then outlined and the empirical findings from qualitative research reported before conclusions are drawn.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Economic statecraft and tourism

Sanctions have long been a popular tool of economic statecraft and have been used "in pursuit of a broad range of objectives related to international conflict prevention, conflict management, and conflict resolution" (Jentleson, 2000, p.124). In the post-Cold War era, sanctions have become a popular unilateral policy instrument (the United States being the most common user) (Farrall, 2007), and an increasingly central element of multilateral foreign security policy for international organizations (UN Security Council) or regional actors (e.g. EU). The term 'sanctions' in international law refers to "coercive measures, taken by one State or in concert by several States (the sanctioner), which are intended to convince or compel another State (the sanctionee) to desist from engaging in acts violating international law" (Ilieva et al., 2018, p.201).

The political goals behind sanctions are diverse and ambitious, while the measures themselves can take many forms. The nature of the measures imposed has shifted from comprehensive sanctions regimes (e.g. against Iraq in the 1990s) to more 'targeted' or 'smart' sanctions (e.g. against Iran, Russia, and Belarus), which are directed at specific individuals or entities (through asset freezes and travel bans) or by prohibiting particular activities (arms embargoes and export bans) (Farrall, 2007). Comprehensive sanctions are intended to restrict the trade and economic development of targeted countries, and usually negatively affect their GDP, bilateral trade, and financial services (Coleman, 2001). Neuenkirch and Neumeier (2015) suggest that multilateral sanctions (e.g. UN sanctions) and unilateral sanctions (imposed by the US) reduce, on average, the targeted country's GDP by 25% and 13% respectively.

Sanctions are a widely-researched topic in international relations, political economy and political science (Baldwin, 1985; Drezner, 2011; Leyton-Brown, 2017). Nonetheless, despite this vast and growing literature, the widespread use of economic sanctions as a coercive foreign policy tool and their immediate and multifaceted impact on the tourism industry (Seyfi & Hall, 2020), there is limited research on the effect of sanctions on tourism in the target destination or firm in spite of the growing use of tourism as an instrument of geopolitical pressure (Hall, 2005;

Timothy, 2017; Gillen & Mostafanezhad, 2019). Furthermore, despite the significance of politics and foreign policy in relation to tourism as well as the mobility of individuals within geopolitical systems (Hall, 2017), recent studies on the wider literature on tourism and geopolitics (Hall, 2017, Timothy, 2017; Mostafanezhad, 2018; Gillen & Mostafanezhad, 2019) have largely neglected sanctions as an important topic.

Restrictions on tourism mobilities have been used as an economically-oriented political instrument. This can be seen in a number of past and contemporary examples of mobilities restrictions. For example, these include longstanding US restrictions on its citizens traveling to Cuba (Coleman, 2001); Russian sanctions against Turkey in 2015 that restricted Russians visiting Turkey and halted tour packages (Tekin, 2015); Russian flight bans against Georgia in 2019 (Roth, 2019); travel ban placed by President Trump's administration in 2017 restricting travel to the United States for citizens of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen (Arafa, 2018); and more recent EU travel bans against Belarusian officials following the post-election crackdown on demonstrators in August 2020 (Barigazzi, 2020). In addition to mobility restrictions, sanctions disrupt financial investment and supply chains and impact destination image and can serve to isolate the destination from some international tourism market segments thereby affecting international visitation, investment, destination development and industry structure (Seyfi & Hall, 2019a, 2020).

Yet, the extant studies as outlined above tend to be more state-centric and fail to examine how economic sanctions have affected specific disadvantaged groups, including women who comprise a large portion of the labor force in service-oriented industries such as tourism (Ferguson, 2011; Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015). The gendered consequences of sanctions and how this coercive policy leads to disempowerment of women will be discussed in the next section.

2.2. Gendered instrument of statecraft

Although the sanctioning of countries is usually conceived as being a gender-neutral act, they often affect the most vulnerable populations, including women, who bear the burden of the sanctions at a higher level (Drury & Peksen, 2014). Criticism over the utility and effectiveness of sanctions consequentially resulted in a 'qualitative shift' from comprehensive embargoes towards 'smart' or 'targeted' sanctions (Cameron, 2003; De Goede, 2011). The reforms in sanctions policy supposedly enable sanctioning actors to use more focused sanctions as a means to target power elites and ruling classes while imposing less hardship on the mass public (De Goede, 2011). Nevertheless, numerous relatively comprehensive sanctions remain in place and, as noted in the introduction, the lack of consideration of gender issues in their application is remarkable given awareness of the effects of economic crisis in general, and the importance of gender empowerment as a policy response to structural economic crisis, disasters and inequalities (Padgett & Warnecke, 2011).

Despite the existence of a plethora of literature on the economic impacts of sanctions, only a handful of empirical studies have focused on the impact of sanctions on marginalized and vulnerable groups such as the poor and women (Buck et al., 1998; Al-Ali, 2005; Al-Jawaheri,

2008; Drury & Peksen, 2014; Gutmann et al., 2019). When a state's overall economy is affected by sanctions, women's social, political, and economic rights are often substantially affected and the unequal effect on women may be overwhelming. In an early effort to examine the gendered consequences of sanctions, Buck et al. (1998) concluded that the costs of trade sanctions are disproportionately imposed on Iraqi women, who are the country's most marginalized political actors. Cross-national research conducted by Drury and Peksen (2014) also shows that sanctions have a gendered effect and reduce the level of respect for women's rights in the targeted countries. A more recent study by Gutmann et al. (2019) also revealed that women are affected more severely by the imposition of sanctions given that countries exposed to sanctions experience both increases in poverty and income inequality, which typically further marginalizes women.

Sanctions have also been viewed in the case of authoritarian countries such as North Korea, where women are particularly vulnerable to the effects of sanctions because of "the twin expectation that they be primary caretakers of their families and communities as well as workers fully integrated in the socialist economy" (United Nations, 2019, p. 36). A similar study of Rarick (2006) on Myanmar shows that economic sanctions exacerbated inequalities in Myanmar, with women more affected than men. Al-Jawaheri (2008) examined the gendered impact of sanctions on Iraq and found that the economic sanctions from 1990 to 2003 differentially effected female labor force participation in Iraq, their family relationship, literacy level and psychology. Taheri and Guven-Lisaniler, (2018) also revealed that economic sanctions have had a significant negative impact on Iranian women's labor force participation and have inhibited valued functioning and capabilities of Iranian women. Nonetheless, to the best of our knowledge, there is no study which specifically examines the gendered consequences of sanctions in relation to tourism and female empowerment, and this study aims to fill this gap in the literature.

2.3. Women empowerment

Empowerment is a multidimensional social process to help individuals to gain control over factors that affect their lives (Scheyvens, 1999; Eger, Miller, & Scarles, 2018; Trommlerová et al., 2015). Notions of empowerment, and women's empowerment in particular, have increasingly moved to the core of understandings of sustainability and the SDGs in particular. In great part, this is because the framing of sustainability has moved from a focus on inter-generational justice, as in the Brundtland report, to a fuller concept which has an aim of sustaining human freedoms, rather than only the ability to fulfil felt needs. A concept encapsulated in Sen's (1999) notion of 'development as freedom'. As Sen (2013, p.6) observes, "Human freedoms include the fulfilment of needs, but also the liberty to define and pursue our own goals, objectives and commitments, no matter how they link with our own particular needs". This shift in focus meant, for example, that then Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) explicitly resolved to "promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable" (UN, 2000). The revision of the MDGs and preparatory work for the SDGs placed further emphasis on human rights and empowerment as being central to development (Nanda, 2016). However, there was, and still is, a substantial gap between policy and implementation.

According to the UN Commission on the Status of Women (2014, p.12), "almost 15 years after the Millennium Development Goals were adopted, no country has achieved equality for women and girls and significant levels of inequality between women and men persist". This was particularly the case in secondary education, which is a major contributor "to the achievement of gender equality, the empowerment of women, and the human rights of women and girls and several positive social and economic outcomes" (UN Commission on the Status of Women, 2014, p.20). But overall progress on the MDGs was characterized by the "the lack of economic empowerment, autonomy and independence for women, including a lack of integration into the formal economy, unequal access to full and productive employment and decent work, and the lack of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value" (UN Commission on the Status of Women, 2014, p.21).

The more specific elements of women's empowerment in the SDGs (Goal 5) (UN Women, 2020), highlights the way in which the concept has become mainstreamed in development thinking, including within tourism (Nanda, 2016; Cole, 2018; Boluk et al., 2019). By generating revenue in SMEs and larger related businesses (UNWTO, 2019), it is argued that tourism can empower all individuals in a community and especially marginalized and disadvantaged groups, such as women (Ferguson, 2011; Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015), especially by strengthening women's entrepreneurship (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016; Baum, 2018). As a result, women empowerment has come to be addressed by many global institutions and initiatives such as the UNWTO *Global Report on Women in Tourism* (UNWTO, 2019). Nonetheless, much rhetoric has frequently focused on tourism as a potential vehicle for women empowerment, but the highly gendered activity of tourism has often been neglected. Cole (2018) criticized the discussion on empowerment in the development literature and calls for re-conceptualisation of tourism entrepreneurship for women beyond its artificial economic, masculinist framings (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2020). For Cole (2018, p.2), "empowerment as so frequently conceptualized deals only with productive and not reproductive labour, and fails to address the structural inequalities that lie at the base of societies built on patriarchal symbolic and normative codes". Indeed, the focus on women's entrepreneurship and access to micro-finance as empowering potentially only reinforces the existing structural gendered inequalities in global and national economic and financial systems (Gentry, 2007; Robinson et al., 2019).

Within the tourism context, the seminal conceptualisation of empowerment derives from the works of Scheyvens (1999) who examined tourism development processes via a multidimensional model that highlights economic, social, political and psychological aspects of empowerment. This framework provides a departure point for the current study given that, as Movono and Dahles (2017) state, it provides a pathway for examination of specific marginalized groups such as women within communities dependent on tourism.

In the Scheyvens framework, social empowerment consists of improvements to community integration, collaboration and cohesion (Scheyvens, 1999; Moswete & Lacey, 2014). Scheyvens (1999) also argues that social empowerment may take different forms in response to more equitable sharing of the benefits of development. Gender-based social empowerment has been addressed in several studies (Moswete & Lacey, 2014; Ramos & Prideaux, 2014). For

instance, in their study on cultural tourism initiatives in Botswana, Moswete and Lacey (2014) found that employment in tourism activities contributes to an enhanced social connection with outsiders and encouraged better lifestyle choices for women. Similarly, Peterson's (2014) research within a rural fishing village in Baja California Sur, Mexico revealed that tourism contributes to the collaboration among individuals in a community.

The political dimension of empowerment has become a significant focus of gender and empowerment studies in sustainable tourism (Scheyvens, 1999; Ferguson, 2011; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012). One example of the political empowerment of women is the study of Moswete and Lacey (2014) in Botswana who found that after the implementation of a government-sponsored cultural tourism initiative, women had greater rates of active participation and ownership in the tourism industry as well as having their voices better represented in management and policy-making. For Cole (2006), this dimension of empowerment is at "the top end of the participation ladder where members of a community are active agents of change and they have the ability to find solutions to their problems, make decisions, implement actions" (2006, p. 631).

Economic empowerment via tourism refers to enabling the community to capture the economic benefits from tourism with the income generated being shared and distributed between a community's households thereby leading to an improved quality of life of residents (Scheyvens, 1999). Tourism therefore can potentially support economic empowerment by generating employment, income, and providing entrepreneurial opportunities. However, it is important to recognize that issues of income parity and distribution are a very significant element of empowerment processes.

Psychological empowerment relates to community members' attitudes and beliefs related to their community and organization which enables them to feel a sense of work control (Scheyvens, 1999). For Gil Arroyo et al. (2019, p.3) "a psychologically empowered individual is self-reliant and independent, whereas a psychologically disempowered individual is apathetic and submissive". The psychological dimension of empowerment focuses on the capacity of tourism development to boost confidence and self-esteem of residents and recognition of the uniqueness of natural and cultural features of their community (Scheyvens, 1999; Boley & McGehee, 2014; Ramos & Prideaux, 2014). Boosting pride and self-esteem associated with psychological empowerment is believed to be one of the most important non-economic benefits from tourism (Stronza & Gorillo, 2008), and one of the best predictors of resident support for tourism (Boley et al., 2017).

Through this lens, this study therefore aims to examine how these dimensions of tourism-related women's empowerment can be affected by the applications of economic sanctions, that are supposedly gender-neutral. This will be discussed further in the sections below.

3. Methods

3.1. Study context

Iran's location at the crossroads of major cultures and trade routes (e.g. the Silk Road) as well as the diverse climate and landscape has created a rich resource for tourism development (Seyfi & Hall, 2018). Iran has traditionally been a destination for cultural tourists, and in the aftermath of the Islamic revolution of 1979 and the subsequent establishment of a theocracy, the country attracts many religious tourists and pilgrims from the surrounding countries. Iran has abundant tourism resources. As of August 2020, 22 historical sites and two natural sites are listed under the UNESCO World Heritage List, while 56 more sites are tentatively listed (UNESCO, 2020). Iran also has 13 elements listed as part of the World Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2020). Nevertheless, despite such abundant resources and potential, the Iranian tourism industry has suffered significantly since the upheavals of the late 1970s, with negative imagery in major tourism markets, the anti-Western stance of government, and political instability and conflicts in the Middle East (Morakabati, 2011; Seyfi & Hall, 2018). The decades-long comprehensive sanctions adversely affected Iran's economy and disrupted key trade activities including tourism. Successive waves of financial sanctions have also blocked Iran's access to the global financial system, leading to restrictions on foreign investment and inhibited Iran from purchasing new airplanes and spare parts (Seyfi & Hall, 2019a).

Although the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a 2015 landmark agreement backed by the United Nations to resolve a long-running dispute over Iran's nuclear enrichment programme, temporarily led to an easing of sanctions (Seyfi & Hall, 2018), the unilateral withdrawal of US from the agreement and the re-imposition of sanctions in May 2018, severely hurt Iran's economy (Seyfi & Hall, 2019c). Since then, the Iranian currency has lost two-thirds of its value against the US dollar, in 2019 the inflation rate reached over 55%, unemployment rose to 16.8%, and the GDP shrank by 9.5% (SCI, 2020).

Decades of sanctions on Iran have substantially damaged the economy and adversely affected the standard of living for ordinary Iranians (Moret, 2015; Taheri & Guven-Lisaniler, 2018). Women in Iran tend to be disproportionately affected by sanctions given their already vulnerable situation in the country given its largely traditional and patriarchal nature (Fathollah-Nejad, 2014; Tahmasebi, 2018). Widespread unemployment affects entire families, but especially women, and exacerbates male dominated gender relations. The 2020 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap report, ranks Iran 148th at global level and 16th regionally for gender equality, including equality in economic participation (WEF, 2020) (table 1), while other indicators also show a huge gender gap in the country.

Table 1: Gender gap in Iran (out of 153 countries)

Global Gender Gap Index	148
Economic participation and opportunity	147
Educational attainment	118
Health and survival	130
Political empowerment	145

Source: Global Gender Gap Report 2020, World Economic Forum, 2020

Unemployment in Iran is especially high among young people and women and 42% of Iranian women between the ages of 15 and 29 are unemployed (SCI, 2019) despite their higher education levels overall. Nonetheless, the number of women participating in Iran's job market is very low (only 17%) (SCI, 2019), due to many legal and social barriers, which restrict their livelihood and their economic contribution (Shahidian, 2002).

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) (2019) Iran's travel and tourism sector accounts for 6.5% of overall GDP, and the total contribution of travel and tourism to employment was 5.4% of total employment (1.344 million jobs) in 2019. Nonetheless, there is no reliable data on the employment rate of women in Iran's tourism and hospitality industry because of the absence of a reliable statistical system. Nevertheless, research suggests that the contribution of women to tourism-related activities increased following the lifting of economic sanctions in 2015 (Farahani & Dabbaghi, 2018). The tourism industry was among the first industries to witness an immediate growth in the light of the removal of sanctions with Iran receiving a rapid growth in international tourism. More than five million inbound tourists visited Iran in 2017, nearly three times the number in 2009, and many major airlines resumed direct flights to the country. There was also a considerable investment in the country's tourism-related infrastructure especially hotels as well as the transport (Seyfi & Hall, 2018). Yet, following US government's unilateral withdrawal from the agreement, the escalated tensions between Iran and the US and the growing regional rivalry have negatively affected the Iranian tourism industry. Many foreign companies have now left the Iranian market as they are unwilling to risk losing access to the U.S. and exclusion from the dollar-based financial system, and major airlines have halted direct flights to Iran while the country is again isolated from the global financial system.

3.2. Research design

This research used an exploratory, qualitative paradigm that originates from an interpretivist approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018) given the subjective and multifaceted nature of empowerment (Moswete & Lacey, 2014) and reflects Joo et al.'s (2020, p.10) observation that the "convoluted and contextual nature of empowerment may make it well suited for the qualitative approach". Given the relatively exploratory nature of the study, qualitative methods were considered appropriate as to explore the personal and subjective interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of women sharing their insights on how sanctions influenced women's empowerment. Furthermore, feminist scholarship has recommended that qualitative feminist epistemology is best positioned to give access to data on a sensitive research topic (Caprioli, 2004; Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015).

3.3. Sampling, data collection and analysis

Given the unavailability of comprehensive established networks of women working in the tourism and hospitality industry in Iran and clear statistical data on the number of women employed in the sector, a purposeful snowball sampling technique was therefore adopted by the researchers to enable them to explore the research questions (Flick, 2009). Participants were identified by snowball sampling when those first contacted were asked to identify others who may be interested in doing an interview. This sampling technique was deemed most appropriate

to attain a purposive sample suitable for this study (Flick, 2009). Although this method might entail some bias in the selection of participants, given the Iranian cultural context and the sensitivity of the topic, it is useful when the target is hard to reach (Atkinson & Flint, 2001), and where the security of respondents as well as researchers is paramount (Hall, 2011). Initial contact to request for interview was made via email and messages on LinkedIn, with an explanation of the purpose of research. Those who responded positively were contacted to explain the structure of the interview and ask their availability for a telephone, Whatsapp and Skype interview. Using emerging internet technologies as a research medium in qualitative studies has been recognised and is more conducive for some hard-to-reach and geographically dispersed groups (Hanna, 2012).

Qualitative research tends to target a relatively small and focused sample to understand the individuality of the phenomenon being explored and the uniqueness of its circumstances (Maxwell, 2008). This research followed the concept of ‘data saturation’, when additional interviews added little or no additional information was being generated (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and theoretical saturation was achieved after 28 interviews at which point interviewing was concluded. A pilot study was conducted with four interviewees to test the interview questions, along with interview style and approach (Kim, 2011). The sample included women working in a tourism-related role representing different sectors of tourism and hospitality industry, and women working in non-tourism jobs. A further five interviews were conducted with men working in a tourism-related job to glean some insights of masculine perspectives (Moswete & Lacey, 2014).

A semi-structured in-depth interview process was used to gather in-depth accounts of respondents’ experiences (Bradford & Cullen, 2013). Questions were framed according to the focus of the research and were selected from various related studies (Scheyvens, 1999, 2000; Moswete & Lacey, 2014; Seyfi & Hall, 2020) and modified to be applicable to the Iranian context. They were open-ended in order to gain more spontaneous opinions and avoid the potential bias from restricting responses to the researcher's own fixed categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interview guide inquired about female workforce characteristics, their involvement in tourism, and perceptions of women’s roles and empowerment in various dimensions in pre and post sanction environments, and the effects of sanctions.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Persian and lasted 30 minutes, on average, covering a range of 20–60 minutes. To maintain confidentiality, the participants were assigned codes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and were back translated into English by the lead author to ensure consistency in meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To secure trustworthiness, participants were provided a copy of the transcription of their interviews and feedback was sought to increase dependability of the findings (Nowell et al., 2017). Interview transcripts were examined thematically based on the theoretical framework of the study in the psychological, political, social, economic dimensions of empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999). Qualitative thematic analysis was adopted for data analysis. Thematic analysis is the most widely used qualitative approach to analyzing interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and is valuable for working within realist or constructionist social science paradigms and seeking a

richer and more nuanced understanding of empirical material (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

4. Research findings

4.1. Economic disempowerment

As noted in the discussion on sanctions as a gendered instrument of statecraft in the literature review, economic disruption caused by sanctions reduces the welfare of the target state's populace in general and often leads to greater economic discrimination against women. In the view of nearly all our interviewees, sanctions-related effects on the Iranian economy have had a direct impact on the employment and livelihoods of Iranian female workforce. One respondent commented:

Women are more vulnerable to economic crises, often are the first to lose their jobs and have less job security as compared to men...in our society, there is the stereotypical view that business owners are typically men who are breadwinners and are responsible for the household expenses.... sanctions have threatened the livelihoods of women and robbed women of their job security, and over the past year I have seen several instances of layoffs among my friends (interview #1)

This was echoed by another interviewee with many years' experiences in hotel industry:

Sanctions have created a situation in which women embrace jobs without any occupational health care benefits.... this economic pain can be felt in a variety of ways such as lower pay in the hotel and accommodation sector, vulnerable employment [and] no government assistance (interview #20)

The respondents believe that the sharp reduction in tourist arrivals to Iran as result of sanctions have disrupted tourism-related services and even worsened their situation (e.g. interview #11, 12, 23). They argue that sanctions have made the inbound market very vulnerable and unstable. A tour guide explains:

...after the lifting of sanctions, we had a huge increase in the number of arrivals and I was always busy with the incoming tours, but after the return of sanctions, we have had less and less tours, and I just work two weeks a year... I see this job as my main occupation and always have the stress of being fired and I can hardly foresee long-term stability in the job (interview #5)

Financial independence and women's income generation for family as the 'bread winner' were the empowerment issues most commonly identified by women in this study. The interviewees were of the belief that tourism contributed to their economic and social empowerment (e.g. interviews #4, 10, 26). This was noted by a respondent:

Tourism arrivals in our village allowed me to rent our home to them and earn good money by providing local food and souvenirs to tourists. My daughters also helped me, and we had a good business... I felt happy and I could generate income for my family in addition to my role as the housewife and my related tasks (interview #19)

Such perspectives are significant because a woman being the main earner is not a normative gender role in household employment in Iran. The loss of employment opportunities for women therefore only serves to reinforce stereotypical gendered work and household roles in Iranian society which has economic as well as broader social implications. This was commented on by a university professor:

Losing a job for a woman means, they not only lose their economic independence, but also their social autonomy by losing control over their lives and having fewer choices (interview #16)

4.3. Political disempowerment

Increasing female employment is central to poverty reduction, maintaining economic growth and fostering equality and independence for women. This is commented on by an interviewee who argued that tourism development had given women more voices in decision-making and tourism development:

In our patriarchal society we always hear that men have more knowledge about political matters than do women and thus women are largely underrepresented in political arenas and policymaking... but tourism has provided a chance for women in touristic villages in Iran where women have confidence in their abilities to campaign for participation in tourism planning development. They run businesses and largely participated in the promotion of tourism in their villages by creating cooperatives for example (interview #23).

Another interviewee expressed that involvement in tourism-related activities and the income generation has changed the traditional view on women as a housewife. She commented:

I think that the tourism industry gives a big chance for Iranian women to show their skills and it is a big opportunity for changing stereotypes about women's workforce. Just imagine how difficult it is for us to change old and traditional views on our society and we are trying to change people's minds by actively participating in tourism activities (interview #22).

Nonetheless such gains are overshadowed by sanctions. As stated by a female entrepreneur:

... the number of tourists has declined enormously and women who were involved in tourism activities are obliged to return to their so-called 'traditional' jobs of being simply housewives (interview #17)

4.3. Social disempowerment

Some interviewees were of the belief that sanctions negatively affected their social empowerment. They believe that the growth of tourism as a result of lifting of sanctions could change the passive role of women into active role capable of managing their social life (interview #19). They also mention that this process provided them with better access to opportunities and more involvement in making decisions through social interactions (interview #15). A female tour guide stated:

Working as a tour guide provided me with the opportunity to have interactions with foreign tourists and learning about their cultures... now with the reduced number of tourists, I lost my job and my contacts in the network (interview #6).

This was echoed by her colleague:

My job as a tour guide has helped me to make new foreign friends, understand other cultures, share our opinions about experiences, and extend my social networks. So, overall, I can say that my activities in tourism industry have changed my thoughts about women's roles in society. It makes me feel being an empowered woman (interview #5).

However, new difficulties have emerged for women after the reimposition of sanctions. A travel agency manager commented:

Under normal economic situation, we have to spend three times more energy compared to men to launch our entrepreneurial activities with the male-dominated administration and more and more red tape. Imagine under economic pressure caused by sanctions, we have to spend five times more energy to prove ourselves so that they can trust our abilities (interview #12)

This was echoed by another respondent:

During the sanctions time, the priorities changed for the government and less and less support was given for loan and banking credit, if there is any chance, priority is given to the men rather than us. The credit facilities that were given to women, especially women-headed households were restricted. This has led many women to abandon their entrepreneurial plans and stay at home (interview #10).

Our interviewees also argued that economic coercion led to higher crime rates emanating from widespread unemployment and high inflation, and therefore created an insecure business environment for women in Iran (interview #16, 18, 23). One of the respondents stated:

I observe that sanctions directly made unsecure business environment from the societal perspective and imagine how women can continue to work under such conditions. Under the influence of sanctions, a healthy business environment has become an insecure environment, which reduces women's confidence and confidence in such an environment (interview #26).

4.4. Psychological disempowerment

In the eyes of a majority of interviewees, participation in tourism activities has produced a degree of relational satisfaction that convinces women that they have accomplished their goals. For instance, one of the respondents commented:

in Iran, we have an idiom that says; '*Zan Rais-e Khaneh Ast*' [women are the boss of home and are not able to lead other places], but here I am working as a woman. I rent the local houses to tourists and my daughter works as a guide at the village. So, other women should not believe the proverb. I am satisfied with this job and about myself. The tourists always encouraged me, my family is proud of me... But now, I cannot continue my business because I lose a big part of my market (interview #19)

A local hotel-restaurant owner also commented:

When tourists were coming to our village, we could see that they are very interested in our traditions, local clothes and handicrafts. This made everyone happy in the village, old and young people were proud of their culture... I know several women in our village decided to go back to school to continue their secondary and high school diplomas [as a result of their experiences] (interview #24).

In the eyes of many respondents tourism plays an important role in job generation for young women. However, the reduced number of tourists and the societal effects of sanctions have negatively affected such empowerment opportunities. This was noted by a university lecturer:

I have seen many young women come to get the vocational training to enter to the job market...having a job and earning income and interacting with others at workforce gives them build their self-confidence that they are a productive members of society.... But I have seen many of my former students are now jobless and have lost their confidence (interview #16).

The next section reflects on the implications of women's disempowerment as a result of economic sanctions on Iran in the context of the wider sanctions literature and espoused goal of the SDGs to empower women.

5. Discussion

Economic empowerment is central to realizing women's rights and gender equality and to the overall achievement of the SDGs (UN Women, 2020). Tourism has been viewed as a sector that can advance gender equality and women's empowerment and increased levels of economic independence for women (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016; UNWTO, 2019) and contribute towards SDG5 which focuses on gender equality and women's empowerment (Boluk et al., 2019). Nonetheless, as the findings of this study showed, economic sanctions has led to direct effects on employment and entrepreneurship because of fewer tourist numbers and it has also contributed to financial discrimination against women because it has only served to reinforce pre-existing structural gender discrimination in Iran's banking and financial services and other aspects of Iranian society.

Compared with other countries subjected to sanctions, the Iranian case is unique. Female empowerment via tourism is arguably more significant in Iran compared to other sectors given that tourism and hospitality employment and entrepreneurial activities serve as an 'acceptable' extension of women's emotional labor and service roles to conservative elements of a highly patriarchal society (Shahidian, 2002; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010; Farahani & Dabbaghi, 2018; Seyfi & Hall, 2019d). As the study's findings revealed, the application of sanctions removed a significant avenue of women's empowerment and only reinforces long-established conservative gender roles that frame the lack of gender equality and the capacity for women's independence in Iran's legal and political structures. Such exacerbation of female disempowerment as a result of sanctions is little discussed in the extant literature and this study has highlighted the significance of this rarely studied phenomenon in tourism.

Women in Iran face numerous cultural, religious and political barriers and are disproportionately affected by sanctions given their already vulnerable situation in a largely traditional and patriarchal society (Farahani & Dabbaghi, 2018; Tahmasebi, 2018; Taheri & Guven-Lisaniler, 2018). Women have historically been sensitive to the issue of sanctions as economic downturns and hardship lead to increased calls [by men and male religious and political leaders] for jobs to be protected for men, and for women to be forced back into "traditional" roles. This situation finds support in the work of Fathollah-Nejad (2014) on the counter-productivity of sanction who, just prior to JCPOA, suggested that "the rise in unemployment is likely to fuel regressive conservative social policies that aim at preserving the traditional social status reserved to the male population by externalizing the costs of sanctions onto the female population. These include measures that push women out of jobs, relegate them to the domestic sphere, and curtail their access to higher education" (2014, p.57).

The results of this study also highlight how women's economic empowerment is vulnerable to social and political factors. Economic empowerment is therefore not just an economic issue but needs to be placed with the broader societal context. In the case of Iran these necessitate recognition of the intensely patriarchal nature of society and the theocratic nature of governance and regulation as major factors constraining the process of women's economic empowerment. When the economy is experiencing growth, as when the JCPOA was operative and tourism was expanding, the nature of tourism service roles and the reduction in competition (with males) for tourism jobs enabled women to occupy positions and empower themselves economically. However, when the restrictions returned to the economy and tourist numbers fell so women

have disproportionately lost employment. Suggesting empowerment was a temporary and vulnerable phenomenon and the empowerment cannot just be considered as an economic factor alone, without accompanying social and political change. This reflects that empowerment is a process. Without sanctions tourism provided an economic foundation for the empowerment of Iranian women. However, with their reimposition the process has stopped and gone in reverse.

As the findings of this study revealed, internal structural factors in Iran mediated disempowerment in addition to the external factor of economic sanctions. Such issues have been little previously discussed, with the empowerment literature – including in the tourism context – failing to sufficiently engage with issues of disempowerment with the factors that shape and reinforce disempowerment being rarely discussed. This would appear to be a potentially important extension to the framework of Scheyvens (1999) and research on women's empowerment in tourism.

The comments of respondents as to the societal effects of sanctions provide significant insights for gender and tourism scholarship. During economic downturns, governments tend to emphasize large infrastructure projects, generally dominated by men, to create employment, thereby neglecting the more women-oriented service industries and micro-enterprises (Drury & Peksen, 2014; Van Engeland, 2019). The Iranian situation with respect to tourism reflects the results of other studies that have found that the sectors in which women are primarily employed are also the ones most affected by sanctions (e.g., Rhodesia (Galtung, 1967), South Africa (Levy, 1999), Haiti (Gibbons & Garfield, 1999), Myanmar (Rarick, 2006), Iraq (Al-Ali, 2005; Al-Jawaheri, 2008; Buck et al., 1998), and Syria (Moret, 2015).

Other studies on the effects of sanctions have also reflected the results of this study that the target state, economic weakened by the sanctions but with domestic political support for regimes often increased and is less likely to enforce women's social and political rights (Drury & Peksen, 2014) and economic sanctions tend to reduce the target government's ability to provide welfare services (Buck et al., 1998; Gibbons & Garfield, 1999; Al-Jawaheri, 2008; Moret, 2015). As Van Engeland (2019) suggests, the economic situation has been used by conservative elements in the Iranian ruling elite to justify new laws on family or work that limit "women's contribution to the public sphere as well as their presence in society" (Van Engeland, 2019).

Other research has also found that the economic downturn triggered by the sanctions leads to greater economic grievance which incites more social disorder and instability and results in further gender-based structural limits on women's social and political rights (Buck et al. 1998; Drury & Peksen, 2014; Taheri & Guven-Lisaniler, 2018; Gutmann et al., 2019). Moreover, such impacts also have a spatial dimension as they disproportionately affect urban centres in which women has previously been able to work. Indeed, these measures not only impact women's economic empowerment but also severely affect their self-esteem and sense of wellbeing thereby contributing greatly to their psychological disempowerment.

The structural effects of political sanctions in Iran are not to be underestimated. The harsher security approach toward civil society ensuing from the sanctions have created obstacles for women in Iran, as well as minorities. Tahmasebi (2018) argues that: “women’s rights advocates have often been accused by hardliners of seeking to adopt Western values, which undermine the Islamic values of the country. As such, they have worked hard to ensure their demands are rooted locally, while also reflecting universal rights principles”. Fathollah-Nejad (2014, p.57) further observes, that “the sanctions can serve as the political platform on which conservative politics can go on the offensive in order to marginalize women from education and employment, consequently also limiting the space for women's rights activism”. The effects of the economically coercive environment created by sanctions on women is therefore only amplified by the existing gender structures that sanctions have reinforced (Van Engeland, 2019).

One important further observation to make on the relationship between empowerment and tourism is that all notions of empowerment in tourism are inherently either explicitly or implicitly linked to its economic functions. This research identifies that, in the Iranian political, religious and cultural context, economic empowerment is the overarching contributor to empowerment to other forms of empowerment. This role as an enabling factor for other types of empowerment is arguably significant not only in terms of the sanctions placed on Iran but will potentially also apply to other societies in which women do not have equal political and human rights.

6. Conclusion

With women’s empowerment being a core element of tourism’s contribution to the SDGs, especially in a developing country context, this study has contributed to the understanding of the intersection between gender empowerment and tourism by empirically contextualizing the gendered effects of economic sanctions on empowerment. This study provides insights into the dynamics between gender empowerment and the tourism industry in Iran which are constrained by domestic (religio-patriarchal society) and external (sanctions) factors and has highlighted the key challenges Iranian women involved in tourism face as a result of sanctions.

Drawing upon Scheyvens’ (1999) framework that recognizes four dimensions of empowerment; social, economic, political and psychological, the findings of this study highlight the temporal aspect of empowerment and demonstrate that the tourism development process in Iran particularly in the post-sanctions era was generally posited as an empowering opportunity for women. However, it also suggests that in terms of Iran at least, the economic foundations of empowerment in tourism is critical for the other dimensions to occur within a tourism context. Unless the conservative theocratic superstructure changes the other aspects of empowerment do not effectively exist without the economic contribution of tourism. This means that the gains made during the period when sanctions were lifted are being lost. The reimposition of sanctions by the US and its negative implications for Iranian tourism, have greatly affected the empowerment of women through tourism.

This study represents the first effort to explore the gendered effects of sanctions on women's empowerment within a tourism context. It lays the groundwork for better understanding the gendered consequences of a coercive geopolitical tool of diplomacy that substantially affects tourism and indicates that such foreign policy mechanisms have implications for gender empowerment that stand in stark contrast to their intended aims. In particular it highlights that the unintended effects of sanctions on tourist flows, and therefore the tourism industry, and that the indirect mediating effects with respect to existing structural economic, cultural and political inequalities may be just as significant in (dis)empowering processes.

Limitations and directions for future research

Future research is recommended with respect to the conduct of ethnographic studies for deeper understanding of the women empowerment processes in Iran and to further explore empowerment themes. However, in the Iranian case it must be emphasized that such research has to be undertaken with great sensitivity given the broader issues surrounding women's employment and entrepreneurship. Future research should also focus on comparative studies with other countries with similar contexts to explore the factors that shape women's empowerment as well as longitudinal studies that are sensitive to understanding change. As highlighted by this research, future studies need to consider the temporality and vulnerability aspect in studying empowerment. Longitudinal studies that examine the temporal dimensions of empowerment and changing women's perceptions of empowerment in relation to tourism potentially better capture empowerment processes than single shot studies and provide more context-based insights into women's empowerment.

While these findings add new perspectives to the understanding of gender and empowerment in tourism, there are, however, limitations relating to this research. In particular, this study is constrained by the usual limitations of qualitative research and the obtained sample may not be representative of the female labor force in the Iranian tourism industry.

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