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Economic indicators of rural destination development oriented to tourism management: The case of ethno villages in Western Serbia

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores the economic indicators of rural destination development focused on tourism management, with a specific emphasis on four ethno villages in Western Serbia. Our study, conducted from May 2022 to May 2023, gauges the local community's perceptions of tourism's economic impacts, particularly on women's roles and overall quality of life. **Methodology** – Utilizing Chi-Square Tests, we assessed key economic dimensions such as employment, arts, agriculture, tourism, and investments. This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted economic aspects relevant to rural destination development. **Findings** – The results of our study reveal positive influences on various economic dimensions, underscoring the transformative effects of rural tourism. Notably, observed economic aspects exhibit encouraging trends, emphasizing the potential for rural tourism to contribute positively to the economic landscape. **Implications** – Despite the positive outcomes, persistent gender imbalances underscore the need for targeted interventions aimed at enhancing women's participation in the local economy's development. This study contributes valuable insights into the nuanced relationship between rural tourism and economic advancement, emphasizing the imperative for inclusive strategies in tourism management and addressing gender disparities for comprehensive rural development.

Keywords: rural tourism, economic impact, tourism management, rural development, Serbia

JEL classification: O13, Q01, Z32

Ekonomski pokazatelji razvoja ruralnih destinacija orijentisani na menadžment u turizmu: Slučaj etno sela u Zapadnoj Srbiji

Sažetak

Svrha – U radu se istražuju ekonomski pokazatelji razvoja ruralnih destinacija fokusiranih na turistički menadžment, sa posebnim akcentom na četiri etno sela u Zapadnoj Srbiji. Naša studija, sprovedena od maja 2022. do maja 2023. godine, meri percepciju lokalne zajednice o ekonomskim uticajima turizma, posebno na uloge žena i ukupan kvalitet života.

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Metodologija – Koristeći Hi-kvadrat testove, procenili smo ključne ekonomske dimenzije kao što su zapošljavanje, umetnost, poljoprivreda, turizam i investicije. Ovaj metodološki pristup omogućava sveobuhvatno ispitivanje višestrukih ekonomskih aspekata relevantnih za razvoj ruralnih destinacija. **Rezultati** – Rezultati našeg istraživanja otkrivaju pozitivne uticaje na različite ekonomske dimenzije, naglašavajući transformativne efekte ruralnog turizma. Posebno, posmatrani ekonomski aspekti pokazuju ohrabrujuće trendove, naglašavajući potencijal seoskog turizma da pozitivno doprinese ekonomskom pejzažu. **Implikacije** – Uprkos pozitivnim ishodima, stalna rodna neravnoteža naglašava potrebu za ciljanim intervencijama koje imaju za cilj povećanje učešća žena u razvoju lokalne ekonomije. Ova studija doprinosi dragocenom uvidu u nijansirani odnos između ruralnog turizma i ekonomskog napretka, naglašavajući imperativ inkluzivnih strategija u upravljanju turizmom i rešavanje rodni dispariteta za sveobuhvatan ruralni razvoj.

Ključne reči: ruralni turizam, ekonomski uticaj, turistički menadžment, ruralni razvoj, Srbija
JEL klasifikacija: O13, Q01, Z32

1. Introduction

The symbiotic connection between tourism and economic development is becoming more apparent (Jansen, 2023; Pascariu et al., 2021), with rural destinations playing an important part in this relationship (Mair, 2006). As globalization enables more mobility and connection (Khondker, 2023; Paasi & Ferdoush, 2023), rural communities that were previously disregarded are suddenly forced into the spotlight as possible centers for tourism-driven economic growth. According to Popsa (2020), the key advantages of rural tourism extend to every local community, encompassing financial gains, employment prospects, and increased satisfaction among residents. By uncovering the richness of rural life rural tourism, a facet of nature-based tourism, becomes a catalyst for social and economic benefits within local communities (Seal, 2022). De Boer and Dijk (2016) emphasize the dual focus on conservation and local economic development in the partnership between rural tourism initiatives and local communities. While exploring the possibilities for preserving local specificity and economic development in Romanian rural areas, Crăciun et al. (2022) highlight that a few researchers noticed that the primary objective of such a relationship, including impact on overall territorial development (Stefan et al., 2021) is the creation of a favorable environment and improved living standards through the integration of services and production networks (Cândeia et al., 2009).

In developing rural tourism destinations, it is crucial to adopt an approach that enhances regional income (Kürüm Varolgüneş et al., 2022). Rural tourism should be a source of profit for the local communities that support and promote it, ensuring that the investments of local entrepreneurs are not only recovered but also doubled through the income generated by tourism (Crăciun et al., 2022; Dezi et al., 2014). This implies an active and clearly defined management strategy in the destination. The importance of the successful management of rural tourism is the focus of Canh and Thanh (2020) who define it as a dynamic continuum that encompasses strategic and operational processes, wherein operational actions are interconnected and evolve from destination policy development, planning, and strategy formulation. Considering this, Ćurčić et al. (2021) maintain that the literature makes it clear that in rural tourism management, there is a simplification of the essential need to involve the host community in the management process. They also add that facilitating increased participation of individuals in development initiatives holds significant importance for attaining both effective and sustainable development. In that way, there is a potential for greater economic benefit from rural tourism for the local community and the method to retain the people in the rural environment. The function of rural tourism in fostering

economic diversification establishes a mechanism for retaining individuals (Wijijayanti et al., 2023). Emphasizing the essential requirement to diversify economic activities, it is widely regarded as crucial for households to attain sufficient income and reach a specific standard of living.

Moreover, the opportunity for economic empowerment is recognized in women's entrepreneurship, and its alignment with improving women's status, family, and community well-being is emphasized (Haugh & Talwar, 2016; Vuković et al., 2023). According to Karthik (2023), rural tourism has the potential to serve as an advantageous alternative for empowering and uplifting women in rural areas. Therefore, this aspect will be also observed in this study.

Understanding the economic dynamics of rural destinations necessitates an exploration of diverse indicators that encompass both micro and macro perspectives. At the macro level, indicators such as GDP contribution, employment generation, and infrastructure development provide a holistic view of the impact of tourism on the regional economy. On a micro level, community engagement, income distribution, and entrepreneurial activities offer insights into the nuanced fabric of rural societies. This research navigates the specific economic indicators shaping the trajectory of these villages, emphasizing critical variables such as employment opportunities, arts and handicrafts, agriculture, human relationships, tourism, investments, women entrepreneurship, and women empowerment.

Given this context, this study delves into the complex economic factors that shape the path of rural destinations, with a focus on the ethnic communities that are scattered across the countryside of Western Serbia. In this research, we focus on several economic variables such as employment opportunities, arts and handicrafts, agriculture, human relationships, tourism, and investments. These variables play a significant role in establishing sustainable economic development of Koštunići, Vraneša, Sunčana reka, and Sirogojno – ethno villages in Western Serbia. The selected ethno-villages stand out for their rich cultural heritage, ethnic diversity, and strategic geographical location in Western Serbia. These characteristics make them ideal subjects for studying the economic impacts of tourism, community engagement, and the enhancement of women's roles, providing valuable insights into rural destination management and sustainable development strategies. In addition, acknowledging the transformative role of women in rural tourism is imperative for a comprehensive understanding of the economic landscape. In the context of the study area, women are active contributors to entrepreneurship and community development. While previous studies have examined the economic impacts of tourism, little attention has been paid to the specific roles and contributions of women within these rural communities. By focusing on women's involvement, the study seeks to uncover barriers, opportunities, and strategies for enhancing gender equality and empowerment in economic activities such as crafts, agriculture, and tourism. Understanding women's roles in economic development is crucial for fostering inclusive growth and sustainable livelihoods in ethno villages, thus highlighting the significance of this research endeavor.

2. Materials and methods

In our study, we relied on the local community's viewpoints to assess how tourism impacts their quality of life economically and socially. We adapted our methodology from Monterrubio et al. (2020), who sought the local population's insights into the primary impacts of tourism development in rural areas. Our objective was to convey the local community's perspectives on the consequences of tourism development, specifically the transformation of ethno villages and objects into tourist attractions, on the quality of life in the surrounding villages. With a particular focus on women's roles and their impact on

overall quality of life, we anticipated positive outcomes. Conducted from May 2022 to May 2023, our research covered the local population of eco-ethno villages in Western Serbia — Koštunići, Vraneša, Sunčana reka, and Sirogojno. A total of 469 respondents participated, providing ratings on a 1-5 ordinal scale, where 1 represented the most negative impact, 5 the most positive, and 3 indicated no change. We utilized a Likert scale to gauge the gradation of attitudes.

The study aimed to assess the significance of specific attitudes within economic and social dimensions, to mitigate negative aspects and highlight positive elements in the development of rural destinations. In this research, we focused on variables that were presumed to exert the most significant influence on the quality of life for the local population. The dependent variable examined is economic impacts (Employment opportunities, Arts and handicrafts, Agriculture, Tourism, and Investments). Among the independent variables, we incorporated “Gender” into the study. To explore the potential associations between variables and the likelihood of connection, Chi-Square Tests were employed. The initial assumption was that there would be no disparity in responses based on the gender of the participants, and statistically significant differences were defined as those with p-values less than 0.05.

From that point, the following primary and supporting hypotheses may be derived:

H₁: The development of ethno-villages in Western Serbia is strongly influenced by the economic indicators of Sustainable Tourism Development.

H_{1a}: Development of tourism in ethno-villages in Western Serbia directly affects the empowerment of women in rural areas.

H_{1b}: The openness of the local administration towards tourists has a positive effect on the development of rural tourism in the ethno-villages of Western Serbia.

In their work, [Monterrubbio et al. \(2020\)](#) investigated sustainability indicators (economic, sociological, and ecological) influenced by tourism development and their impacts on the local population. It was shown that all three indicators of sustainability are equally important from the aspect of tourism development, but that the positive or negative impacts of tourism are directly proportional to the form of tourism that develops at the destination. [Monterrubbio et al. \(2020\)](#), point out that the local population has a negative attitude towards the development of certain forms of tourism, even when it comes to economic indicators. The works of other researchers support their findings. According to [Ingelmo \(2013\)](#), ecological indicators of sustainability indicate that it is important for the destination that the forms of tourism that develop there are themselves sustainable (ecotourism, rural tourism). [Atzori et al. \(2019\)](#) indicate that tourists who visit destinations are a reflection of the form of tourism that develops there, that is, they indicate the importance of sociological indicators of sustainability. According to [Hussain et al. \(2023\)](#), rural tourism is a sustainable, responsible and desirable form of tourism, especially from the aspect of sociological and ecological indicators. Also, all these scientists claim that the often positive economic effects of tourism development on the destination lead to negative ecological and sociological indicators, which can negatively affect the perception of tourism development in the future. In our work, we wanted to show that the development of rural tourism in the destination will be positively influenced by the positive economic effects of the development of rural tourism in the region of Western Serbia, that is, that the economic indicators of sustainable development of rural tourism have a push-up effect among the local population.

The paper specifically assesses the perceptions of the local community regarding tourism’s economic impacts, particularly emphasizing women’s roles and overall quality of life. This research comprehensively assesses key dimensions including employment, arts, agriculture,

tourism, investments, and women empowerment, providing a multifaceted view of rural destination development.

While this study provides valuable insights into the economic indicators shaping the trajectory of ethno villages in Western Serbia, a few limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the research relies on data collected from a specific set of ethno-villages within Western Serbia, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other rural areas or regions with different socio-economic contexts. Future research could expand the scope to include a broader range of ethno-villages across Serbia to provide a more comprehensive understanding of rural tourism dynamics in the country. Secondly, the study primarily relies on self-reported data from the local community, which may be subject to bias or inaccuracies. Future research could incorporate additional data sources, such as interviews with key stakeholders or observations of tourist activities, to obtain additional credibility of the findings and enhance the validity of the results. Future research could also examine the role of external factors such as government policies, market trends, or global events, which may influence the economic development of ethno villages and their interaction with local dynamics to provide a more nuanced understanding of rural tourism dynamics in Western Serbia.

3. Results and discussion

Rural tourism had a similar impact on much better employment opportunities for both genders (Table 1), which can be considered expected considering that the chances of creating new jobs are one of the basic concepts of rural tourism (Singh et al., 2022). This indicates that representatives of the local population have seen that tourists, in addition to spending on accommodation, often spend their money in village shops, catering establishments, markets, etc. They are an excellent market for local producers, thus providing opportunities for local business development (Aytuğ & Mikaeili, 2017).

Table 1: Employment opportunities

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Employment opportunities	No change	Count	8	13	21
		% of Total	1.7%	2.8%	4.5%
	Better	Count	22	9	31
		% of Total	4.7%	1.9%	6.6%
	Much better	Count	226	190	416
		% of Total	48.3%	40.6%	88.9%
Total	Count	256	212	468	
	% of Total	54.7%	45.3%	100%	

Source: Authors' research

In terms of employment opportunities, rural tourism has a similar impact for both genders, but a slight imbalance in favor of men can be seen (Table 2). This indicates the need to do more to create jobs for women in rural areas. In the [Master Plan for Sustainable Development of Rural Tourism in Serbia \(2011, p. 119\)](#), it is suggested that the development of traditional activities that are mainly related to women should be encouraged and thus contribute to their employment (Panić & Popesku, 2021).

Table 2: Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	Df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	5.671 ^a	2	0.059

* The value is significant at the level equaling 0.05

Source: Authors' research

A significantly high proportion of respondents reported much better arts and handicrafts due to rural tourism (Table 3). To maintain and preserve the special features of the area, by valorizing traditional painting and craftsmanship, representatives of the local community use rural tourism as a platform for promoting these special features, as well as for creating an authentic tourist experience. Many professionals have emphasized that tourism plays a role in supporting these activities, both in recognizing their value and in the purchase of locally crafted goods (Kumar et al., 2020).

Table 3: Arts and handicrafts

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Arts and handicrafts	No change	Count	11	8	19
		% of Total	2.4%	1.7%	4.1%
	Better	Count	24	2	26
		% of Total	5.1%	0.4%	5.6%
	Much better	Count	221	202	423
		% of Total	47.2%	43.2%	90.4%
Total		Count	256	212	468
		% of Total	54.7%	45.3%	100%

Source: Authors' research

Despite the uniform attitudes on this issue, there is a great imbalance in the use of arts and handicrafts as a result of the emergence of rural tourism (Table 4). The engagement of women in fostering rural tourism development is exemplified through their involvement in creating various handicrafts (Vujko et al., 2018). This represents a potential sector that, with minimal investment, can offer opportunities for self-employment and income generation.

Table 4: Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	15.947 ^a	2	0.000

* The value is significant at the level equaling 0.05

Source: Authors' research

A similar proportion of males and females reported (Table 5) no change in agriculture due to rural tourism (2.6%). This indicates that rural tourism contributed a lot to the accelerated development of agriculture as well as the marketing of agricultural products. Local food products play a significant role in raising the quality of the overall tourist experience, whether they are used in the preparation of food served to guests or sold raw, as a kind of souvenir. The authenticity of domestic products and the methods of their preparation play an important role in the planning and development of rural tourism (Obrađović et al., 2023).

Table 5: Agriculture

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Agriculture	No change	Count	5	7	12
		% of Total	1.1%	1.5%	2.6%
	Better	Count	16	3	19
		% of Total	3.4%	0.6%	4.1%
	Much better	Count	235	202	437
		% of Total	50.2%	43.2%	93.4%
Total		Count	256	212	468
		% of Total	54.7%	45.3%	100%

Source: Authors' research

The Pearson Chi-Square Test indicates that there is significant unevenness regarding the impact of rural tourism on agricultural development (Table 6). This data can be viewed from the context of the participation of women and men in agricultural work. As a rule, women participate more in jobs related to the household and agricultural activities, at the same time often not having equal rights to the distribution of income (Gajić & Vukolić, 2021).

Table 6: Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	7.651 ^a	2	0.022

* The value is significant at the level equaling 0.05

Source: Authors' research

The largest number of respondents of both genders noticed significant changes for the better in terms of human relations, as a result of the development of rural tourism (Table 7). This confirms the thesis that different forms of rural tourism, such as agrotourism for example, positively influence the understanding of different cultural characteristics and traditional practices that positively influence the development of interpersonal relationships (Chikuta & Makacha, 2016). This is also reflected in the creation of better cooperation between local entrepreneurs, and as a result, in the more efficient development of the local economy.

Table 7: Human relationships

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Human relationships	No change	Count	10	10	20
		% of Total	2.1%	2.1%	4.3%
	Better	Count	20	2	22
		% of Total	4.3%	0.4%	4.7%
	Much better	Count	226	200	426
		% of Total	48.3%	42.7%	91.0%
Total		Count	256	212	468
		% of Total	54.7%	45.3%	100%

Source: Authors' research

Despite the fact that both genders indicated a significant improvement in interpersonal relations, there is a noticeable inequality in the distribution of these attitudes (Table 8).

According to Vujko et al. (2018), due to traditional practices regarding the organization of hierarchy and relationships in rural households, women notice more the changes that rural tourism brings regarding the development of more open interpersonal relationships (Maksimović et al., 2019). This leads to the establishment of better cooperation between all participants in the local economy, whether they are directly or indirectly involved in creating the tourist offer of the observed tourist sites.

Table 8: Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	12.286 ^a	2	0.002

* The value is significant at the level equaling 0.05

Source: Authors' research

The largest number of respondents of both genders (96.1%) notice changes in terms of tourism development in the observed areas (Table 9). Bearing in mind that rural tourism is the basic tourist product in less developed places, it is certain that its development has the greatest impact on overall tourism development. The development of rural tourism is not the independent development of tourist resources, tourist economy or tourist services, nor the partial inclusion of these links, but the “comprehensive development” of all links in the tourism system (Tieyan, 2023).

Table 9: Tourism

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Tourism	No change	Count	7	11	18
		% of Total	1.5%	2.4%	3.8%
	Better	Count	15	2	17
		% of Total	3.2%	0.4%	3.6%
	Much better	Count	234	199	433
		% of Total	50.0%	42.5%	92.5%
Total		Count	256	212	468
		% of Total	54.7%	45.3%	100%

Source: Authors' research

A significantly higher proportion of males reported a much better tourism development experience due to rural tourism. The largest number of respondents of both genders (96.1%) notice changes in terms of tourism development in the observed areas (Table 9). Bearing in mind that rural tourism is the basic tourist product in less developed places, it is certain that its development has the greatest impact on overall tourism development. The development of rural tourism is not the independent development of tourist resources, tourist economy or tourist services, nor the partial inclusion of these links, but the “comprehensive development” of all links in the tourism system (Tieyan, 2023). Women are considered a passive workforce in rural tourism (Rasanjali et al., 2021).

Table 10: Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	9.607 ^a	2	0.008

* The value is significant at the level equaling 0.05

Source: Authors' research

Both genders have reported much better experiences in other aspects due to rural tourism – 91.9% (Table 10). These data tell us that the development of rural tourism (Balaguer & Cantavella-Jorda, 2002) has contributed to a better experience of the local population in all aspects that are directly or indirectly related to the tourist economy, and were not previously analyzed (Vujko et al., 2021). That indicates that the development of rural tourism attractions contributes to the overall enhancement of rural economic administration (Blake, 2009; Gao & Wu, 2017).

Both genders have reported a better climate for investments (93.5%) as a result of rural tourism development in the observed areas (Table 11). This development supports the effort of the local community to be more engaged in the development by investing the rural tourism offerings (Fotiadis et al., 2019; Garrod et al., 2006). Likewise, the investments in tourism activities come outside the local community as well (Einali et al., 2023), thereby creating additional room for the development of tourist infrastructure and content in the tourism destination.

Table 11: Investments

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Investments	No change	Count	13	17	30
		% of Total	2.8%	3.6%	6.4%
	Better	Count	154	141	295
		% of Total	32.9%	30.1%	63.0%
	Much better	Count	89	54	143
		% of Total	19.0%	11.5%	30.5%
Total		Count	256	212	468
		% of Total	54.7%	45.3%	100%

Source: Authors' research

Wily (2021) states that women experience greater distress from land investments than men. In societies dominated by patriarchy, women and girls face increased risks without commensurate benefits from these investments. Yet, the Pearson Chi-Square Test (Table 12) indicates that in this example there is no significant unevenness in attitudes between the genders regarding the increase in investments as a result of rural development. This indicates that both men and women equally feel that with the development of tourism in rural areas, there is a greater number of investments, both from the local population and foreign capital. Investments in this context can be considered not just in terms of investing in agricultural assets (Edafe et al., 2023) but also in terms of technical infrastructure, such as dedicating resources to renewable energy sources (Woolacott et al., 2023) which is completely in line with the philosophy of sustainable development.

Table 12: Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	5.585 ^a	2	0.061

* The value is significant at the level equaling 0.05

Source: Authors' research

Only 8.5% of all respondents have not seen any changes in the involvement of women entrepreneurship (Table 13) as a result of rural tourism development. Female entrepreneurs in rural tourism may be more constrained by existing patterns in the economic sector (Nordbø, 2022), and which makes the result very encouraging when the observed areas are

analysed. This implies that in rural areas, especially those with a historically male-centric demographic, women who lack professional interests or jobs can seize opportunities to earn, fostering increased economic self-reliance (Vuković et al., 2023) seeing that as a main pull factor considering their desire for more independent work and life (Möller, 2012).

Table 13: Women entrepreneurship

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Women entrepreneurship	No change	Count	23	17	40
		% of Total	4.9%	3.6%	8.5%
	Better	Count	138	116	254
		% of Total	29.5	24.8%	54.3%
	Much better	Count	95	79	174
		% of Total	20.3%	16.9%	37.2%
Total		Count	256	212	468
		% of Total	54.7%	45.3%	100%

Source: Authors' research

Table 14: Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	0.141 ^a	2	0.932

* The value is significant at the level equaling 0.05

Source: Authors' research

The balanced impact of enhanced opportunities for female entrepreneurship among both men and women is evident, as indicated by the Pearson Chi-Square Test (Table 14). Opportunities for women's entrepreneurship in rural development encompass activities like rural tourism, eco-tourism, and agricultural tourism (Çolakoglu et al., 2022). Participation in entrepreneurship within rural tourism significantly economically benefits women, providing them with opportunities for financial independence and empowerment. Moreover, the multiplier economic effects of rural tourism should be emphasized, especially bearing in mind that certain entrepreneurial activities are not directly related to the tourist offer but have economic benefits from it. For example, women who initiate and manage small-scale agro-tourism ventures not only contribute to the economic growth of their communities but also gain direct financial rewards, allowing them to invest in education, healthcare, and other essential needs for themselves and their families.

Table 15: Women empowerment

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Women empowerment	No change	Count	18	15	33
		% of Total	3.8%	3.2%	7.0%
	Better	Count	145	115	260
		% of Total	31.0%	24.6%	55.6%
	Much better	Count	93	82	175
		% of Total	19.9%	17.5%	37.4%
Total		Count	256	212	468
		% of Total	54.7%	45.3%	100%

Source: Authors' research

Over 90% of respondents of both genders agree that with the advent of rural tourism, the position of women in the local community has been strengthened (Table 15). Positive economic effects reflected in the opinion that increasing women's control over economic resources has far-reaching positive effects, acting as a potent catalyst for both gender equality and development (Blumberg, 2005). According to Slathia et al. (2015), the extent of rural tourism's positive impact on women's empowerment hinges on addressing issues such as poverty alleviation.

Table 16: Pearson Chi-Square Test

Attachment 10.	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	0.292 ^a	2	0.864

* The value is significant at the level equaling 0.05

Source: Authors' research

There is no statistical significance in the difference of attitudes between the genders when talking about the effect of rural development on the empowerment of women in the local community (Table 16). It implies that both genders, on average, tend to share similar views about the effects of rural tourism development on the empowerment of women in the local community.

4. Conclusion

The findings underscore the significant positive influence of rural tourism on employment opportunities, arts and handicrafts, agriculture, human relationships, tourism, and investments in Western Serbia. The development of rural tourism has led to improved employment opportunities, contributing to economic growth in the region. However, there is a notable gender imbalance, with men benefiting slightly more, emphasizing the need for targeted efforts to create more job opportunities for women in rural areas.

Arts and handicrafts have seen a substantial improvement due to rural tourism, with the local community leveraging traditional skills to create authentic tourist experiences. Women's engagement in creating various handicrafts presents a potential sector for self-employment and income generation, requiring minimal investment. Agriculture, a crucial aspect of rural economies, has experienced accelerated development and increased marketing of agricultural products. The significance of local food products in enhancing the overall tourist experience is emphasized, aligning with the authenticity of domestic products in rural tourism development. This plays a crucial role in enhancing the overall tourist experience in the context of rural tourism development and greater economic benefit from selling the products either as raw material for local gastronomic offerings or as food souvenirs that tourists in recent years like to bring home with them.

The development of interpersonal relationships, as a result of rural tourism, has seen substantial positive changes, fostering better cooperation between local entrepreneurs and contributing to more efficient local economic development. This enhanced collaboration not only strengthens community ties but also creates a conducive environment for collective efforts toward sustainable economic growth. Despite both genders reporting improvements, the noticeable inequality in the distribution of these positive changes, particularly observed by women due to traditional practices in rural households, underscores the need for targeted initiatives to address and rectify gender disparities in the ongoing development process.

Rural tourism's impact on tourism development is substantial, as evidenced by both genders acknowledging positive experiences. However, a gender-based disparity in perceptions of

tourism development highlights the need for a more inclusive approach to actively engage women in the tourism economy. Fostering women's participation in decision-making processes within the tourism sector becomes crucial for ensuring that the benefits of tourism development are equitably distributed, contributing to more balanced and inclusive growth in these rural regions.

The study indicates a favorable climate for investments resulting from rural tourism development, supporting the local community's efforts to invest in rural tourism offerings. This positive investment climate not only propels the growth of rural tourism but also creates opportunities for broader economic development in the region. The balanced impact on enhanced opportunities for female entrepreneurship is encouraging, with women in rural areas seizing opportunities for financial independence and empowerment. These entrepreneurial endeavors not only contribute to individual economic well-being but also play a pivotal role in the overall economic landscape of the community.

The research demonstrates that rural tourism not only positively affects economic indicators but also serves as a catalyst for women's empowerment. The strengthened position of women in the local community, as reported by over 90% of respondents, aligns with the broader positive economic effects of rural tourism. This empowerment translates into increased agency for women in decision-making processes, resource control, and community development initiatives. The study affirms that increasing women's control over economic resources has far-reaching positive effects on gender equality and overall community development, signaling a transformative impact of rural tourism beyond its economic contributions. However, enhancing the positive impacts of rural tourism and addressing gender disparities requires a multifaceted approach involving policymakers, local communities, and stakeholders. Policymakers should develop and implement gender-sensitive policies that promote equal access to employment, entrepreneurship opportunities, and leadership roles in rural tourism initiatives. Encouraging the participation of women in leadership roles and creating space for women to voice their opinions and influence decision-making processes can contribute to more inclusive and sustainable rural tourism development. Firstly, women-centric entrepreneurship programs should be established, providing training and financial support to empower women in sectors such as arts, handicrafts, agribusiness, and tourism-related services. Promoting women's handicrafts through cooperatives and marketing platforms can create economic opportunities and preserve cultural heritage. Gender-responsive tourism training should be provided to enhance women's skills and participation in the tourism sector, while leadership development initiatives can empower women to take on decision-making roles within local tourism organizations. Awareness campaigns should challenge gender stereotypes and advocate for gender equality, complemented by institutional support for mainstreaming gender considerations in development agendas. Research and data collection efforts should focus on understanding women's specific needs and experiences in rural tourism, while networking and collaboration can facilitate knowledge sharing and collective advocacy. Through these measures, stakeholders can work towards fostering inclusive and sustainable rural tourism development that benefits both men and women in Western Serbia.

The study's findings provide substantial evidence in support of H1, indicating that the development of ethno-villages in Western Serbia is indeed strongly influenced by the economic indicators of Sustainable Tourism Development. Specifically, the data highlights the pivotal role of tourism in shaping the economic landscape of these rural areas, underscoring the importance of sustainable tourism practices in fostering community growth and development.

The findings provide robust evidence supporting H1a, indicating that the development of tourism in ethno-villages directly contributes to the empowerment of women in rural areas by offering increased economic opportunities and social engagement. Women in these communities are actively involved in various aspects of tourism, including hospitality, artisanal crafts, and cultural preservation, which not only enhances their financial independence but also strengthens their role in decision-making processes within their households and communities. Moreover, the results corroborate H1b by demonstrating that the openness of local administration towards tourists fosters a conducive environment for rural tourism development, facilitating infrastructure improvements, policy reforms, and community partnerships that collectively enhance the attractiveness and sustainability of tourism products in ethno-villages in Western Serbia. Furthermore, the lack of significant inequality in attitudes between genders regarding increased investments suggests a shared positive perspective on the economic benefits of tourism development.

Overall, this study reinforces and extends the existing literature by providing empirical evidence and context-specific insights into the economic indicators shaping the trajectory of ethno villages in Western Serbia. The identification of gender disparities, the transformative role of women, and the local community's perspectives contribute to the academic significance of our study, offering a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of rural tourism and economic development in the specific context of ethno villages. Moreover, our study highlights the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in understanding the multifaceted nature of rural tourism and economic development. By integrating perspectives from economics, sociology, gender studies, and tourism management, we provide a holistic examination of the economic indicators influencing the observed ethno-villages. Thus, this study not only reinforces the academic significance of existing literature but also underscores the value of interdisciplinary research in advancing our understanding of rural tourism and economic development dynamics.

Despite providing valuable insights into the economic indicators shaping the trajectory of ethno villages in Western Serbia, a few limitations of the study should be acknowledged. Firstly, the research relies on data collected from a specific set of ethno-villages within Western Serbia, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other rural areas or regions with different socio-economic contexts. Future research could expand the scope to include a broader range of ethno-villages across Serbia to provide a more comprehensive understanding of rural tourism dynamics in the country. Secondly, the study primarily relies on self-reported data from the local community, which may be subject to bias or inaccuracies. Future research could incorporate additional data sources, such as interviews with key stakeholders or observations of tourist activities, to obtain additional credibility of the findings and enhance the validity of the results. Further research could also examine the role of external factors such as government policies, market trends, or global events, which may influence the economic development of ethno villages and their interaction with local dynamics to provide a more nuanced understanding of rural tourism dynamics in Western Serbia.

The study's findings contribute significantly to key theories in rural tourism and economic development literature by illuminating the gender disparities within rural tourism development, underscoring the necessity of adopting gender-sensitive approaches to rural economic growth. [Monterrubio et al. \(2020\)](#) highlight the significance of economic, sociological, and ecological indicators in assessing tourism's impact on local populations while underscoring the influence of different forms of tourism on these indicators. Our study extends these insights by demonstrating how the positive economic effects of rural tourism development in Western Serbia positively influence local perceptions and contribute to sustainable rural tourism growth. Moreover, the findings reinforce the importance of

community involvement and collaboration in tourism planning and management, echoing theories advocating for community-based approaches to sustainable development. Additionally, the study highlights the role of entrepreneurship, particularly women's entrepreneurship, in driving economic diversification and innovation within rural economies, aligning with theories emphasizing the importance of leveraging local resources and traditional skills.

Finally, the outcomes underscore the critical need for targeted initiatives aimed at addressing gender disparities within the realm of economic development. It is of utmost importance to create an environment that actively promotes and supports increased participation of both genders in various economic sectors, particularly within the context of rural tourism management, is essential. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the significance of ensuring that the advantages stemming from rural tourism development encompass a comprehensive approach, contributing not only to economic progress but also to the broader societal and cultural advancement of the region.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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