

Single Mothers' Entrepreneurship and its Contribution to Rural Tourism Empowerment in Johor

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of single mothers' entrepreneurial activities in contributing to the empowerment of rural tourism in the state of Johor, Malaysia. As rural tourism emerges as a sustainable economic alternative for underdeveloped regions, the involvement of marginalized groups such as single mothers has become increasingly vital. This qualitative study examines how single mothers, through micro-enterprises such as homestays, traditional food production, handicrafts, and agro-tourism services, are shaping the local tourism landscape. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with selected single mother entrepreneurs in rural Johor, supported by document analysis and field observations. The findings reveal that entrepreneurship has not only improved the socio-economic status of these women but has also enriched rural tourism offerings by embedding authentic local experiences and cultural values. Moreover, the integration of technical and vocational training (TVET) was found to enhance their business capabilities, leading to better market reach and product innovation. The study highlights the need for targeted policy support, inclusive training programs, and continuous mentorship to sustain the momentum of rural tourism growth driven by single mothers. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on gendered entrepreneurship, rural development, and community-based tourism in the Malaysian context.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Single Mothers, Women Empowerment, Adult Learning, Socioeconomic Development

INTRODUCTION

The empowerment of women through entrepreneurship has emerged as a critical component of inclusive and sustainable development, particularly in the context of rural communities (United Nations, 2015; Roomi & Parrott, 2008). These studies affirm the importance of integrating gender perspectives into economic development agendas, especially in low- and middle-income countries like Malaysia where gender disparity remains a pressing concern.

Among these groups, single mothers represent a vulnerable yet potentially transformative segment of the population. Faced with socio-economic challenges such as limited access to stable income, lack of formal education, and social stigma, many single mothers in Malaysia, particularly in the state of Johor, have turned to entrepreneurship as a means of achieving economic resilience and self-sufficiency (Yunus et al., 2021; Azmi et al., 2020). Their findings highlight the adaptability and determination of single mothers to overcome structural barriers, which supports the relevance of focusing on this group for rural development strategies.

Concurrently, rural tourism has gained recognition as a strategic sector capable of generating alternative livelihoods, revitalizing local economies, and preserving cultural heritage (Sharpley & Roberts, 2004; Koster & Randall, 2006). These contributions underscore the potential of rural tourism as a multidimensional platform—not only for economic gain but also for cultural sustainability. Hence, its intersection with women-led entrepreneurship presents an untapped synergy worth exploring further.

The intersection of these two phenomena—women-led micro-entrepreneurship and rural tourism—offers a promising avenue for addressing gender inequality and community empowerment (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004). Their study lends weight to the idea that entrepreneurship in tourism should not be seen solely as an economic function but also as a vehicle for social inclusion. In this context, empowering single mothers through tourism-based entrepreneurship may offer dual benefits: elevating women and enhancing local tourism products.

In Malaysia, the government's support for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) has played a significant role in equipping women, including single mothers, with practical skills to enter the tourism economy (Department of Skills Development Malaysia, 2019; Norazman et al., 2022). These initiatives demonstrate the state's commitment to skills-based empowerment, though empirical evidence on how these programs benefit single mothers in the tourism sector is still lacking—this gap justifies the current research.

Training programs in homestay management, traditional cuisine, handicrafts, and agro-tourism have opened new opportunities for income generation and active participation in local tourism development (Jabatan Kemajuan Masyarakat [KEMAS], 2021). While these efforts are commendable, systematic evaluation of their effectiveness from the perspective of single mothers remains limited, thus necessitating further inquiry.

Johor, known for its diverse rural landscapes and cultural richness, presents a unique backdrop for the integration of single mother entrepreneurship within the rural tourism sector (Johor Tourism Department, 2022). As a state with growing tourism clusters, understanding the role of marginalised groups within this development is crucial to ensuring inclusive growth.

However, there remains a gap in empirical research exploring how single mothers contribute to and benefit from the rural tourism ecosystem in this region. Understanding their roles, challenges, and support needs is essential for shaping policies that enhance their entrepreneurial potential while advancing rural tourism agendas (Hasan et al., 2020). Their findings point to persistent structural and psychosocial barriers, which strengthens the rationale for research that highlights both opportunity and constraint.

This study aims to examine the contribution of single mothers' entrepreneurship to rural tourism empowerment in Johor, with a focus on how their participation in micro-enterprises influences the socio-economic development of their communities. It also explores the extent to which TVET-based interventions have facilitated their transition into the tourism sector. By doing so, this research seeks to inform future strategies that leverage grassroots entrepreneurship as a catalyst for inclusive rural development.

A. Contextual Background

In Malaysia, the socioeconomic challenges faced by single mothers have become increasingly visible within public discourse and development agendas. As of 2020, over 650,000 single mothers were registered with the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, a figure that continues to rise annually (KPWKM, 2020). Many of these women live in rural or semi-urban areas and face multidimensional poverty, including unstable income sources, limited access to capital, and low digital or technical literacy (Yunus et al., 2021). In the state of Johor, where agriculture, cottage industries, and tourism form key components of the rural economy, the involvement of single mothers in micro-enterprises has emerged as a survival mechanism as well as an entry point into community-based development.

Simultaneously, Johor is experiencing growth in rural and cultural tourism, particularly in areas such as Desaru, Muar, Pontian, and the foothills of Gunung Pulai. These destinations offer authentic local experiences, including homestays, traditional crafts, heritage foods, and agro-tourism. However, the potential of rural tourism as a mechanism for inclusive development has yet to be fully realised, particularly in terms of integrating underrepresented groups like single mothers into its economic ecosystem. While some women have organically entered this space through informal entrepreneurship—such as selling kuih-muih to tourists or offering homestay services—their contributions are often under-recognised, unsupported, and unsustainable (Hasan et al., 2020).

In response to the need for community upliftment, Malaysia has increasingly invested in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) as a strategy to build human capital, especially among marginalised groups. Programs offered by agencies such as Kolej Komuniti, KEMAS, and Institut Kemahiran MARA include training in food preparation, handicrafts, tour guiding, and homestay management (Department of Skills Development Malaysia, 2019). While such efforts are commendable, there remains a lack of integration between TVET and rural tourism development strategies, particularly from a gender-responsive perspective.

Moreover, existing government policies and tourism development blueprints tend to focus on infrastructure and destination branding, with less attention to grassroots entrepreneurial actors. Without systematic support and strategic inclusion, single mothers may continue to operate at the periphery of the tourism value chain missing opportunities for empowerment, income stability, and community leadership.

This paper argues that empowering single mothers through structured TVET-based entrepreneurial interventions within the rural tourism sector could simultaneously address issues of gender equity, poverty reduction, and sustainable tourism development in Johor. By critically examining this intersection, the paper lays the foundation for a concept that positions single mothers not merely as beneficiaries, but as co-creators of a more inclusive rural tourism economy.

B. Conceptual Discussion

1. Single Mothers and Informal Entrepreneurship

Single mothers are often excluded from the formal labour market due to their caregiving responsibilities, social stigma, and limited mobility. As a result, many resort to informal entrepreneurship—starting home-based or community-oriented microenterprises such as food vending, tailoring, or handicrafts—to support their families (Yunus et al., 2021). This form of entrepreneurship, while frequently overlooked in policy discourse, plays a critical role in sustaining rural economies and fostering social resilience.

Studies have shown that entrepreneurship empowers single mothers not only economically, but also socially and psychologically. It helps restore their sense of agency, identity, and dignity in the face of multiple hardships (Azmi et al., 2020). However, their entrepreneurial potential often remains untapped due to lack of access to training, capital, and structured market platforms. Therefore, recognising single mothers as agents of rural development, rather than passive beneficiaries, is essential for inclusive policy formulation.

2. The Role of TVET in Building Entrepreneurial Capacity

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is increasingly regarded as a strategic enabler of entrepreneurship, especially for marginalised groups such as women and single mothers. TVET equips participants with technical know-how, business literacy, and hands-on skills that are directly applicable to community-based economic activities (Norazman et al., 2022).

In the Malaysian context, TVET programs are offered by institutions such as Kolej Komuniti, KEMAS, and NGOs with modules in homestay operations, agrotourism, food preservation, and tourism product packaging. Yet, there remains a disconnect between these trainings and the entrepreneurial ecosystems required to sustain a tourism-related business. Training is often one-off, short-term, and disconnected from mentorship or financing support. To realise its transformative potential, TVET must be embedded in a holistic model that includes market access, product development, and continuous support—tailored specifically to the realities of single mothers.

3. Rural Tourism as a Platform for Inclusive Development

Rural tourism offers an accessible platform for women and single mothers to participate in the economy using the resources they already possess—cultural knowledge, traditional skills, and social networks. It allows for flexible work arrangements, enables the use of domestic space (e.g., homestay rooms or home kitchens), and promotes the preservation of heritage and identity (Sharpley & Roberts, 2004).

However, as Briedenhann and Wickens (2004) caution, rural tourism cannot succeed without meaningful local participation. If single mothers are to be empowered through rural tourism, they must be positioned as co-creators of experience-based tourism products, not just service providers at the margins. This requires institutional recognition, skill-building through TVET, and integration into tourism supply chains.

4. Towards a Gender-Sensitive Empowerment Model

A key challenge in the current rural tourism development approach is the lack of gender-sensitive frameworks that address the lived realities of single mothers. Empowerment must be seen not only as income generation, but as the capacity to make strategic life choices and influence community change (Kabeer, 1999).

By aligning TVET training with rural tourism strategies and supporting single mothers' entrepreneurship, there is a unique opportunity to build a more inclusive and resilient tourism economy. Such an approach can improve household income, elevate women's community status, and contribute to the diversification of rural tourism offerings in Johor.

In sum, this conceptual discussion supports the development of an integrated model that places single mothers at the heart of rural tourism development through the strategic use of TVET. This model aligns with national development goals, addresses socio-economic inequality, and empowers a marginalised group with high untapped potential.

C. Proposed Conceptual Framework

1. Overview of the Framework

The proposed framework outlines an integrated model that positions single mothers as central actors in the development of rural tourism in Johor, through the strategic application of TVET-based entrepreneurship. It draws from three key components:

- i. Capacity Building through TVET
→ Skills training in tourism-relevant areas such as food processing, homestay management, handicrafts, guiding services.
- ii. Entrepreneurial Activation
→ Business start-up support, microfinancing, mentoring, and local market access tailored to single mothers.
- iii. Integration into Rural Tourism Ecosystem
→ Participation in local tourism clusters, community-based tourism programs, and collaboration with local tourism stakeholders.

This framework assumes that when these three components are aligned, they lead to rural tourism empowerment not only at the individual level (income, skills, confidence), but also at the community level (heritage preservation, job creation, gender equity).

2. Conceptual Model Diagram

FIGURE 1

Conceptual Framework of Single Mothers' Entrepreneurship for Rural Tourism Empowerment in Johor

[TVET Training Modules]

(Skills: culinary, homestay, craft)

↓

[Entrepreneurial Activation Support]

(Mentoring, micro-finance, business development)



[Integration into Rural Tourism Initiatives]

(Tourism cluster participation, product linkages)



[Empowerment Outcomes]

(Income generation, confidence, community role)

3. Theoretical Underpinning

This framework is grounded in the Empowerment Theory (Kabeer, 1999), which views empowerment as the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices. The model also draws from Community-Based Tourism (CBT) Theory, where locals, including women, are positioned as active participants and beneficiaries in the tourism economy (Manyara & Jones, 2007).

Together, these theories justify a grassroots, inclusive approach that centres on the agency of single mothers not only to improve their livelihoods but also to contribute meaningfully to the development of rural tourism in Johor.

D. Significance of the Concept

The proposed concept addresses multiple intersecting policy priorities in Malaysia, including gender empowerment, rural development, poverty reduction, and community-based tourism. Its significance lies in offering a holistic and inclusive model that brings together single mothers, TVET institutions, and the rural tourism ecosystem within a shared framework of empowerment.

1. Academic Significance

This paper contributes to the growing body of knowledge on gendered entrepreneurship and rural tourism by centring the lived experiences and entrepreneurial potential of single mothers an under-researched demographic in Malaysian tourism studies. By integrating empowerment theory, TVET literature, and rural tourism frameworks, this concept adds depth to existing debates on inclusive economic participation and offers a platform for future empirical research. It also encourages cross-disciplinary discourse between social development, gender studies, and vocational education.

2. Practical and Community Relevance

On the ground, the concept provides a blueprint for skills-based interventions that are practical, scalable, and culturally embedded. It responds directly to the needs of single mothers who face socio-economic vulnerabilities yet possess valuable knowledge, resilience, and entrepreneurial potential. The model recognises the informal economic activities already undertaken by many of these women and seeks to formalise, strengthen, and link them to tourism markets through targeted TVET and business support mechanisms.

Additionally, by involving single mothers in the tourism value chain, rural communities can offer more authentic, inclusive, and diverse tourism products, enhancing the overall visitor experience and promoting local identity. In turn, this fosters stronger social cohesion and pride within communities.

3. Policy Implications

The concept aligns with Malaysia's broader development agendas, such as the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (RMK-12), which emphasises inclusive development, women's participation in the economy, and rural transformation. It offers policymakers and stakeholders a community-based approach to tourism development that is gender-sensitive and economically empowering. Furthermore, it complements national TVET blueprints by demonstrating a context-specific application of skills training for real-world livelihood generation.

As such, the paper can inform:

1. Government agencies (example KPWKM, MOTAC, JTM)
2. Community colleges and TVET providers
3. NGOs and women's development organisations
4. Tourism planners at state and district levels

By bridging the gap between TVET, entrepreneurship, and rural tourism, this concept creates opportunities for single mothers to become not just participants, but leaders in their communities. It reimagines rural tourism as a platform for social transformation—where marginalised women can thrive, contribute, and be recognised.

E. Lived Experiences and Case Narratives

1. Voices from the Field: Single Mothers' Narratives

A case example from Parit Jawa, Muar: "Saya tak pernah sangka pelancong luar minat duduk rumah kampung saya. Lepas kursus, saya tahu cara tarik mereka dan jaga servis. Sekarang pendapatan saya lebih stabil." Another participant from Pontian shared: "Dulu saya hanya buat kuih untuk jiran-jiran. Selepas belajar teknik pembungkusan dan pemasaran, saya dapat jual kuih tradisional kepada pelancong sebagai ole-ole Johor." These narratives offer authentic insights into the real-life impact of entrepreneurship linked to rural tourism.

2. Potential Barriers to Implementation

Several potential challenges may arise in implementing this model. These include digital illiteracy among older single mothers, inconsistent funding for continuous training, lack of childcare facilities during training, and weak collaboration between local tourism stakeholders and TVET institutions. Addressing these barriers will require multi-stakeholder coordination and policy-level integration.

3. Potential Barriers to Implementation

To operationalise the proposed framework, implementation will involve four key phases: (i) Identification and recruitment of single mothers from targeted rural locations; (ii) Delivery of TVET modules through partnerships with community colleges and NGOs; (iii) Post-training mentorship and support including access to microfinancing and market integration; (iv) Continuous monitoring using empowerment-based indicators such as income change, self-confidence, and tourism participation. The model will be scaled through regional replication with local stakeholders and supported by data-driven impact assessments.

4. Preliminary Insights from Fieldwork in Johor

Preliminary field observations and informal interviews with single mothers involved in agro-tourism and homestay ventures in Muar and Pontian revealed strong entrepreneurial motivation and community support. Despite their limited access to capital and marketing knowledge, these women expressed optimism about the tourism potential in their villages. These early insights reaffirm the need for structured, supportive, and context-specific TVET-linked interventions to foster sustainable rural tourism.

CONCLUSION

This concept paper has presented a holistic model that positions single mothers as empowered entrepreneurs within the rural tourism landscape of Johor. By integrating Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) with entrepreneurship and community-based tourism, the proposed framework offers a strategic pathway to address multiple development challenges gender inequality, rural poverty, and underutilised tourism potential.

The conceptual model highlights the need to move beyond fragmented training programs and toward a more structured, supportive ecosystem that links skills development to income-generating opportunities in the tourism sector. Central to this approach is recognising single mothers not as passive recipients of aid, but as active agents of change with valuable contributions to make in building inclusive and culturally rich tourism products.

The significance of this concept lies in its potential to be adapted and replicated across other rural regions in Malaysia, making it a valuable reference point for policymakers, educators, NGOs, and tourism developers.

To realise the full potential of this concept, the following actions are proposed:

i. Pilot Program Development

Implement a small-scale pilot project in selected rural tourism sites in Johor (e.g., Pontian, Muar, Desaru) that recruits single mothers for TVET-based entrepreneurship training linked to tourism.

ii. Collaborative Partnerships

Foster partnerships between Community College, local government units, tourism stakeholders, and NGOs to co-develop training modules, mentorship programs, and access to tourism platforms.

iii. Research and Monitoring

Conduct qualitative research to capture the lived experiences of single mothers in the tourism space, and develop impact indicators that measure empowerment beyond income—such as agency, participation, and visibility.

iv. Policy Dialogue and Advocacy

Use the findings and conceptual model to engage with policymakers at the state and national level to inform the design of gender-sensitive rural tourism policies and TVET strategies.

By advocating for a women-inclusive, skills-based approach to tourism entrepreneurship, this paper sets the stage for a more inclusive rural development agenda in Johor and beyond one that empowers single mothers, strengthens communities, and enriches Malaysia's tourism offerings.

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