



# Gendered Perceptions of Ecotourism Empowerment and Local Action in a Community-Based Context: Evidence from Abono in Lake Bosomtwe Biosphere Reserve, Ghana

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## ABSTRACT

Ecotourism is recognized for its capacity to empower local communities and promote sustainable development, yielding positive environmental, social, and economic outcomes. In traditional societies, men and women encounter distinct opportunities and challenges that influence their participation in ecotourism. Despite increased attention to ecotourism's effects, there is limited studies investigating how these impacts shape gendered perceptions of empowerment. This study addresses this gap by analyzing gendered perceptions of ecotourism empowerment and their influence on local action and willingness to participate in such local action in the Abono community at Lake Bosomtwe, Ghana. The results show that both men and women highly value psychological and environmental empowerment, indicating a shared sense of confidence and environmental stewardship. While women prioritized social empowerment and men emphasized economic empowerment, these differences were not statistically significant. Both genders rated political and cultural empowerment lowest, suggesting that ecotourism has a limited impact on local governance and cultural identity. The lack of significant gender differences in empowerment components indicates that men and women in Abono benefit similarly from ecotourism. These findings highlight the potential of ecotourism to promote gender-equitable empowerment and emphasize the importance of inclusive policies in community-based tourism development.

**Keywords:** Ecotourism, community, gender, empowerment, Ghana

## INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism, as a form of sustainable tourism, aims to balance biodiversity conservation with economic development (Boley & Green, 2016). As one of the fastest-growing sectors in the tourism industry, it contributes significantly to foreign-exchange earnings, income generation, and job creation (Zvaigzne, Litavniece, & Dembovska, 2022). In 2024, global ecotourism revenue was estimated at USD 260.76 billion, with projections of growth to USD 295.83 billion in 2025 and USD 814.40 billion by 2032 (Fortune Business Insights, 2025). This expansion has encouraged many developing countries to adopt ecotourism as a strategy for sustainable development. Empirical research supports its potential to reduce poverty through employment creation, revenue generation, entrepreneurial opportunities, and increased income for disadvantaged communities (Chirenje, 2017; Lonn, Mizoue, Ota, Kajisa, & Yoshida, 2018; Sharma, Paudel, Shrestha, & Tripathi, 2018). While some scholars argue that ecotourism's contributions are limited because it creates inequitable distribution of benefits, social and environmental conflicts (Agrawal & Redford, 2006; Cater, 1994; Coria & Calfucura, 2012), it remains a promising approach for improving the well-being of local communities in developing countries (Regmi & Walter, 2017; Scheyvens, 2000).

Existing research demonstrates that the impacts of ecotourism activities differ by gender, influencing empowerment outcomes for men and women (Moswete & Lacey, 2015; Pleno, 2006; Scheyvens, 2000). Stronza & Gordillo (2008) argue that ecotourism can create opportunities and enhance social standing for all genders, but may also perpetuate existing inequalities or introduce new forms of marginalization if not implemented inclusively. Also, Ibrahim and Alkire (2022) highlight the importance of understanding gender-specific barriers

and opportunities to achieve equitable development through ecotourism initiatives. Examining the gendered dimensions of ecotourism is therefore critical to ensuring the fair distribution of its benefits (Morgan & Winkler, 2019). Boley, Ayscue, Maruyama & Woosnam (2016) assert that, one gap of particular importance is empirically assessing perceived differences in empowerment between men and women within tourism development. This is because resident support for tourism is a dynamic and complex concept that is commonly agreed upon as a prerequisite for tourism to be considered sustainable (Cole, 2006). Despite increased attention to ecotourism's effects, there is limited studies investigating how these impacts shape gendered perceptions of empowerment in small local communities. This study addresses this gap by analyzing gendered perceptions of ecotourism empowerment and their influence on local action and willingness to participate in such local action. The objectives are: (1) to examine gender differences in perceptions of ecotourism empowerment; (2) to assess gender differences in local support for ecotourism; and (3) to compare gendered political action within the community. This study aims to foster more egalitarian and resilient communities, in alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), by emphasizing the integration of gender perspectives into ecotourism development (United Nations, 2023). Ecotourism's potential to either empower or otherwise provides the basis to investigate perceptions by gender, to see if differences emerge and, if they do, to be able to develop strategies to address discrepancies. The remainder of the paper presents a literature review on ecotourism empowerment and gender, research methodology, analysis, results of the study, discussion, and conclusions with implications.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of empowerment has taken a central stage in sustainable tourism (Scheyvens, 2000). This is because it is claimed that without empowerment, sustainable tourism development by communities is difficult to attain (Sofield, 2003). In ecotourism, it is viewed as a multifaceted and essential concept in development, particularly, where community involvement and benefits are central. It refers to the process by which individuals or groups gain the capacity to make choices and translate those choices into desired actions and outcomes. This process involves enabling individuals to control decisions that affect their well-being and to improve their access to opportunities, knowledge, and resources (Zimmerman, 2020; Narayan et al., 2021). According to Scheyvens (2000), ecotourism ventures should only be considered 'successful' if they promote empowerment, with local communities having some measure of control over ecotourism development and sharing equitably in any benefits deriving therefrom. Thus, empowerment is critical for fostering equitable participation in political, social, and economic spheres, especially in contexts characterized by gender inequality (Cornwall, 2016).

In the tourism landscape, the discussion on the concept of empowerment suggests it is multi-dimensional. The literature suggests economic, political, psychological, social, cultural and environmental dimensions (See Mendoza-Ramos & Prideaux, 2012; Scheyvens, 2009; Strzelecka & Wicks, 2015). Economic empowerment encompasses benefits such as employment, income, and business opportunities that accrue to residents and local communities through tourism. These benefits are significant drivers of local support for tourism. While both men and women can benefit economically from ecotourism, the distribution of these benefits often varies by gender. In some contexts, women are assigned to lower-paying, less visible roles, such as cooking or handicraft production, while men occupy higher-paying positions, such as tour guides (Scheyvens, 2000). An illustrative comparison can be drawn from Abono community, where men often take roles as boat guides, leading tourists on the lake, earning substantial tips and fees. In contrast, women frequently sell local produce, earning less due to lower tourist interaction. Despite these disparities, ecotourism can empower women by offering income-generating opportunities that enhance their financial independence and bargaining power within households. By visualizing both pathways, ecotourism's role in reshaping local economic dynamics becomes clearer, thereby informing policy aimed at more equitable resource distribution (Ashley & Roe, 1998).

Political empowerment involves having the power, ability, and sense of group identity to take action to create change in a political system. People who work in ecotourism businesses frequently have a say in decision-making processes. Cole (2006, p. 631) describes this dimension of empowerment as 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". Ecotourism contributes to political empowerment by raising people's involvement in advocacy and governance institutions pertaining to community development and environmental protection (Patel et al., 2022). Notwithstanding these advantages, problems including restricted

access to resources, gender biases and unequal power dynamics within the tourism industry still exist. For instance, in some situations, tourism has been found to marginalize residents and local community members' participation in tourism decision-making, creating a limited sense of ownership of the tourism development (Booyens, 2010).

Psychological empowerment resulting from ecotourism enhances self-esteem, pride in local culture, confidence, and dignity among residents (Boley & McGehee, 2014; Ramos & Prideaux, 2014; Scheyvens, 1999). This form of empowerment is essential for fostering local support for tourism (Boley et al., 2014). However, negative experiences, such as embarrassment, have also been reported as psychological disempowerment. Social empowerment, in contrast, refers to tourism's capacity to strengthen relationships within local communities (Scheyvens, 1999). It fosters social cohesion, solidarity, cooperation, and self-efficacy (Boley & McGehee, 2014; Scheyvens, 2000; Strzelecka & Wicks, 2015). It focuses on the relationships between community members and how tourism development may influence community's cohesion and ability to collaborate (Boley & McGehee, 2014; Ramos & Prideaux, 2014). Nevertheless, ecotourism can also result in social disempowerment by generating jealousy, conflicts, and disunity among residents (Scheyvens, 1999). For instance, a study by Ramos and Prideaux (2014) found tourism development socially disempower the Mayan community of El Naranjo because the younger generation sought to develop a greater level of engagement in ecotourism while the older generation was more hesitant to engage in ecotourism.

Environmental empowerment in ecotourism involves a commitment to environmental sustainability and stewardship. It is reported that women frequently lead conservation initiatives at tourist destinations, contributing significantly to habitat restoration, biodiversity monitoring, and sustainable resource management (Buckley, 2019). Their extensive knowledge of local ecosystems and traditional ecological practices enables them to provide valuable inputs into conservation strategies and resilience-building efforts to address environmental challenges such as habitat degradation and climate change (Mbaiwa, 2013). Ecotourism initiatives often encourage women to protect their natural heritage, thereby fostering a stronger sense of communal responsibility for the environment among local populations (Wall, 2012).

Lastly, cultural empowerment in ecotourism involves recognizing and revitalizing local cultural practices, knowledge, and identities. It enables women and communities to assert their cultural heritage and traditions, particularly in the face of external influences that may marginalize or commodify these expressions. Ecotourism can serve as a platform for cultural empowerment by promoting the preservation and dissemination of local customs, languages, and traditional knowledge. In many communities, women act as key custodians of cultural heritage, and their participation in ecotourism allows them to share this knowledge with tourists, thereby gaining respect and recognition within and beyond their communities (Figuerola-Domecq et al., 2023). However, challenges such as cultural commodification, where practices are packaged and sold to tourists, potentially diminishing their original significance persist. To ensure that cultural empowerment benefits local women, careful management and their involvement in planning and decision-making are essential (Chiutsi & Saarinen, 2021). Community-based approaches that enable women to lead and manage tourism activities have proven effective in ensuring that cultural representation remains accurate, respectful, and empowering rather than exploitative.

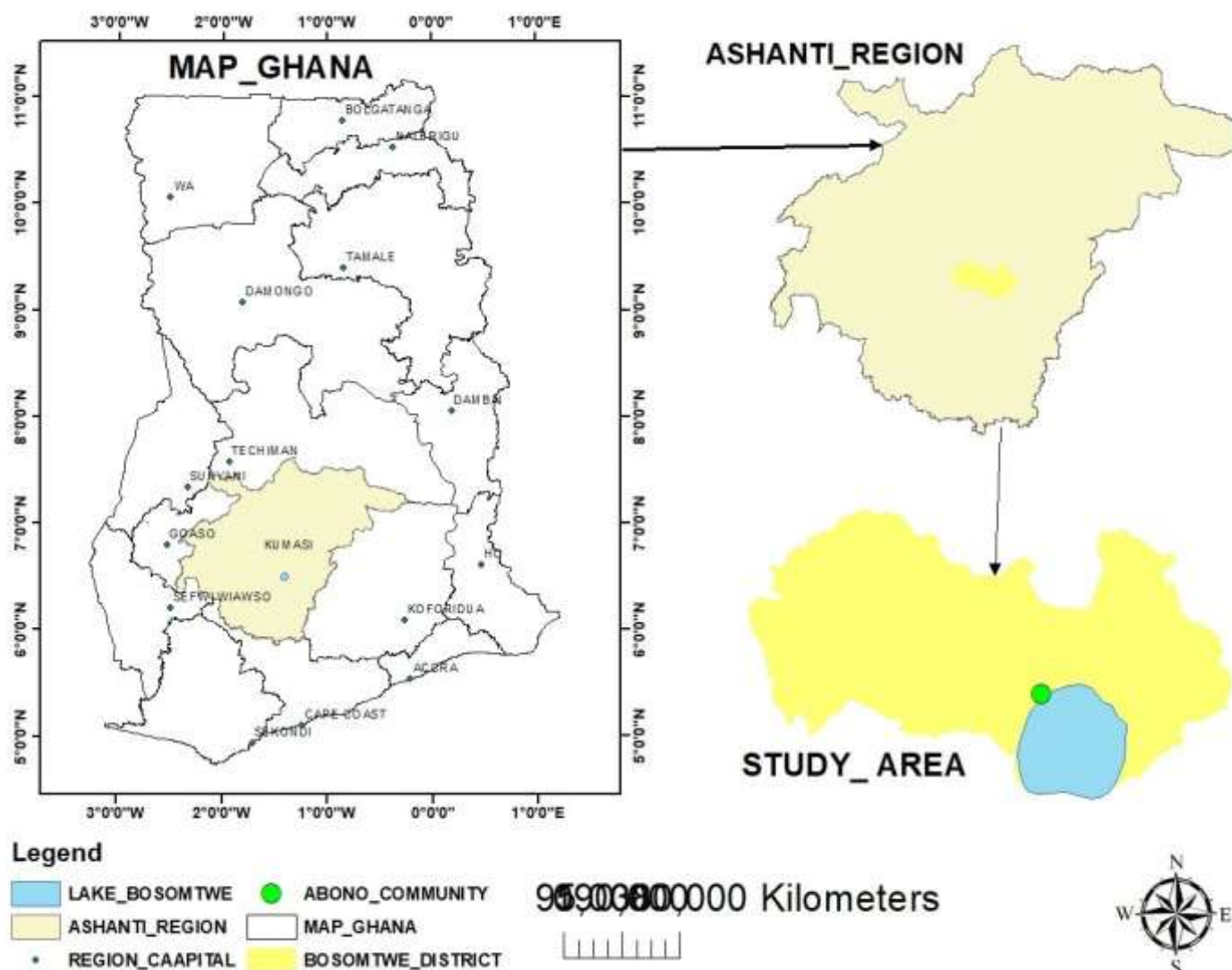
### **Ecotourism, Gender and Empowerment**

While ecotourism is frequently praised for its potential to empower communities, it may also inadvertently reinforce gender disparities or introduce new barriers. It is widely recognized that without gender equality, there can be no sustainability (Bidegain Ponte, 2017; Bidegain Ponte & Enriquez, 2016; UN Women, 2018b). However, equality requires the inclusion of perceptions from both genders to achieve a balanced understanding (Su et al., 2025). This was substantiated by Cole (2018), who emphasized that the empowerment of women within the context of equality is relational to men. However, gender perceptions often differ between males and females (Meretu, Abebe, & Gessese, 2023; Petrzalka et al., 2005). This disparity underscores the importance of a site-specific approach, as demonstrated in the Ghana context of this study, where understanding local gender dynamics is crucial for ensuring equitable CBET practices. A comprehensive understanding of gendered perspectives in ecotourism is essential for developing inclusive and equitable tourism practices.

## METHODOLOGY

### Study Area

This study was conducted in the Abono community, located within the Lake Bosomtwe Biosphere Reserve (See Figure 1). Abono is one of the 22 communities surrounding Lake Bosomtwe, which is the only natural lake in Ghana. The Lake Bosomtwe Biosphere Reserve is recognized as one of the six meteoritic lakes worldwide, situated within an ancient impact crater approximately 10.5 kilometers in diameter. It lies about 30 kilometers southeast of Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti region, and covers an area of 49 square kilometers, with a maximum depth of 81 meters (Amuquandoh, 2010; Boamah & Koeberl, 2007). The Abono community, located within the Lake Bosomtwe Biosphere Reserve, relies on the lake for its livelihoods, with fishing being the primary economic activity, supplemented by agriculture (Appiah et al., 2014). In recent years, community ecotourism has emerged as an increasingly important aspect of the community's economy. This is because the lake's scenic beauty draws visitors for recreational activities such as boating, swimming, and hiking. The lake's appeal as an ecotourism destination is enhanced by its rolling hills, lush vegetation, and the rich cultural practices and traditional lifestyle of the Abono people. It serves as a vital ecological habitat supporting a diverse range of flora and fauna, including several endemic fish species.



**Figure 1: Map of the study area.**

In Abono, ecotourism has resulted in a measurable increase in local income and job opportunities, illustrating how global industry trends can yield tangible local economic benefits. Men are typically involved in guiding and boating that involve direct tourist interaction and are generally more lucrative. In contrast, women often participate in selling local goods, like fried fish, which tend to yield lower monetary returns. Thus, the Abono

community was selected for its active involvement in community-based ecotourism, making it an ideal setting to explore gender perspectives on ecotourism empowerment (Mensah, 2017).

## Research Design

A survey method was employed to investigate gendered perceptions of ecotourism empowerment in the Abono community. Marsh (2025) notes that surveys minimize researcher bias by collecting objective data directly from participants, thereby increasing the validity and reliability of findings. This approach enabled the collection of data from a substantial number of respondents, providing a comprehensive and representative assessment of gender perspectives on ecotourism empowerment. A survey was chosen for its breadth and capacity to include a wide range of respondents.

The survey used questionnaires with closed-ended questions, organized into four sections. It is based on the literature (See Boley & Strzelecka, 2016). The first section covered the demographic characteristics of respondents, including gender, age, education, marital status, and religion. The second section focused on the six dimensions of empowerment (i.e., economic, political, psychological, social, cultural, and environmental), which were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Sample items for each empowerment dimension were included to facilitate assessment of construct validity. For example, economic empowerment was evaluated with items such as 'Ecotourism has increased my household income' and 'I have more employment opportunities due to ecotourism.' Psychological empowerment included statements like 'Ecotourism activities have boosted my confidence' and 'I feel proud of being part of an ecotourism community.' To ensure reliability, Cronbach's alpha values were calculated for each empowerment scale, with scores indicating acceptable reliability (e.g.,  $\alpha = 0.82$  for psychological empowerment). The third section captured local support for ecotourism with four items, while the last section explored the willingness to participate in political action within the community with six items, all assessed using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

The questionnaire was pre-tested on October 23, 2024, with ten community members from Obo, a neighboring community, to evaluate its clarity and reliability. Feedback indicated that the instrument's language and structure were clear. The main survey was conducted from November 1, 2024, to May 20, 2025. During this period, respondents were typically visited at home between 3 pm and 5 pm, as most were unavailable earlier due to farming or fishing activities. A total of 148 respondents directly involved in ecotourism were purposively selected based on attributes relevant to the study (Creswell, 2014).

## Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles to safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of the respondents and to ensure informed consent. Each respondent was provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, as well as their rights and responsibilities. Prior to the interviews, the study's objectives were clearly communicated, and verbal consent was obtained from each respondent. To protect their privacy, names were not recorded during the interviews. Respondents were also informed that the collected data would be used for management decision-making and publication.

## Data Analysis

All variables were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24. Data analysis included both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize the data. Inferential statistics, specifically independent-sample t-tests at the 5% significance level, compared the means between male and female respondents. The t-test was selected for its robustness in comparing two independent groups. All variables were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24. Data analysis involved both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, summarized the data. Inferential statistics, specifically independent-sample t-tests at the 5% significance level, were used to compare the means between male and female respondents. Prior to analysis, data variables were assessed for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test and for homogeneity of variances using Levene's test, both



of which confirmed that the assumptions for the t-test were satisfied. This process enhances the reliability and transparency of the analytical approach.

## RESULTS

The study involved 148 respondents from the Abono community at Lake Bosomtwe Biosphere Reserve in Ghana. These respondents were purposively selected to ensure they reflect the study's objective. Table 1 shows that among the 148 respondents, 60.1% were males and 39.9% were females. The respondents span a range of age groups, with only 4.7% under 19 years old. The majority of respondents (60.1%) were between 20 and 39 years old, with 24.3% between 40 and 59 years, and 10.8% were 60 years and older.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents.**

| Characteristics          | Sample size (n) | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| <b>Gender</b>            |                 |                |
| Male                     | 89              | 60.1           |
| Female                   | 59              | 39.9           |
| <b>Age</b>               |                 |                |
| Less than 19 years       | 7               | 4.7            |
| 20-39 years              | 89              | 60.1           |
| 40-59 years              | 36              | 24.3           |
| Greater than 60 years    | 16              | 10.8           |
| <b>Educational level</b> |                 |                |
| No education             | 25              | 16.9           |
| Primary                  | 7               | 4.7            |
| Junior Secondary         | 49              | 33.1           |
| Senior Secondary         | 57              | 38.5           |
| College                  | 4               | 2.7            |
| Tertiary                 | 6               | 4.1            |
| <b>Marital status</b>    |                 |                |
| Single                   | 80              | 54.1           |
| Married                  | 68              | 45.9           |
| <b>Religion</b>          |                 |                |
| Christian                | 131             | 88.5           |
| Muslim                   | 17              | 11.5           |

In terms of their educational level, 16.9% had no education, 4.7% had primary education, 33.1% had completed their junior secondary education, 38.3% had senior secondary education, 2.7% had a college education, and 4.1% had tertiary education. Concerning marital status, 54.1% of the respondents were single, while 45.9% were married. Also, the majority of respondents (88.5%) were Christians, while 11.5% were Muslims.

## Comparison of the Perception of Ecotourism Empowerment

Gender perceptions of ecotourism empowerment were assessed across the six dimensions of empowerment, as shown in Table 2. The analysis provides rankings of the different dimensions based on mean scores. The p-value was used to assess whether the difference was statistically significant.

**Table 2: Comparison of the perception of empowerment in ecotourism.**

| Dimensions of empowerment | Gender of respondents | Sample (n) | Ranking | Mean | Std. Dev. | Alpha value (p<.05) |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|------------|---------|------|-----------|---------------------|
| 1. Psychological          | Male                  | 89         | 1       | 4.25 | .66       | .34                 |
|                           | Female                | 59         | 1       | 4.14 | .72       |                     |
| 2. Social                 | Male                  | 89         | 4       | 3.87 | .78       | .44                 |
|                           | Female                | 59         | 3       | 3.69 | .79       |                     |
| 3. Political              | Male                  | 89         | 5       | 3.24 | 1.15      | .52                 |
|                           | Female                | 59         | 5       | 3.08 | 1.07      |                     |
| 4. Economic               | Male                  | 89         | 3       | 3.16 | 1.11      | .60                 |
|                           | Female                | 59         | 4       | 2.92 | 1.06      |                     |
| 5. Environmental          | Male                  | 89         | 2       | 4.25 | .72       | .21                 |
|                           | Female                | 59         | 2       | 4.24 | .42       |                     |
| 6. Cultural               | Male                  | 89         | 6       | 3.91 | .85       | .46                 |
|                           | Female                | 59         | 6       | 3.73 | .90       |                     |

Psychological empowerment was ranked highest by both genders (p-value = .34), indicating no statistically significant difference between male and female respondents. However, males reported a slightly higher mean score (m=4.25) than females (m=4.14), suggesting a marginally greater level of psychological empowerment among males. However, the cultural empowerment was ranked lowest for both genders, with a p-value of .46, again indicating no significant gender difference. Overall, both genders exhibited similar rankings across most empowerment dimensions, with only minor variations in social and economic empowerment. Although males generally reported slightly higher mean scores across all dimensions, none of these differences were statistically significant at the .05 level.

## Gendered Comparison of the Local Support for Ecotourism

Table 3 indicates that males have a slightly higher mean score (m=4.69) than females (m=4.58), reflecting marginally greater support for ecotourism among male respondents. However, the difference in mean values is minimal, suggesting that both genders exhibit similar levels of local support for ecotourism. The p-value of 0.28 confirms that this difference is not statistically significant.



**Table 3: Comparison of the local support for ecotourism based on gender.**

| Variable                     | Gender of Respondents | Sample (n) | Mean | Std. Dev. | Alpha Value (p < .05) |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|------------|------|-----------|-----------------------|
| Local Support for Ecotourism | Male                  | 89         | 4.69 | 0.51      | 0.28                  |
|                              | Female                | 59         | 4.58 | 0.64      |                       |

### Gendered Comparison of the Political Action in the Community

Table 4 presents a comparison of mean scores for the intention to engage in political action between male and female respondents in the Abono community. Males reported a higher mean score ( $m=3.65$ ) than females ( $m=3.39$ ). The variability in scores was similar for both genders. The p-value of .05 indicates that the difference in political action orientation between males and females is statistically significant.

**Table 4: Comparison of the political action intention in a community based on gender.**

| Political action | Gender | Sample (n) | Mean | Std. Dev. | Alpha value (p<.05) |
|------------------|--------|------------|------|-----------|---------------------|
| Political action | Male   | 89         | 3.65 | .79       | .05*                |
|                  | Female | 59         | 3.39 | .81       |                     |

NB: \* Statistically significant difference at  $p<.05$ .

## DISCUSSION

The study examined gendered perceptions across six dimensions of ecotourism empowerment: psychological, social, political, economic, environmental, and cultural. With reference to psychological empowerment, both genders identified it as most important, indicating that ecotourism fosters pride, confidence, and dignity among men and women in the Abono community (Ramos & Prideaux, 2014; Scheyvens, 1999). This finding aligns with Lee and Jan (2021), who reported that psychological empowerment in community-based ecotourism enhances self-esteem. Such experiences contribute to local support for ecotourism (Boley et al., 2014; Lee & Jan, 2021). It is not surprising to find that the men claimed to be more psychologically empowered than women. This could be attributed to their involvement in different ecotourism activities in the biosphere.

Environmental empowerment was also highly valued by both genders, reflecting the critical role of environmental stewardship in ecotourism sustainability. This is consistent with Seyfi, Hall, and Rasoolimanesh (2022), who found that ecotourism promotes environmental sustainability and shared responsibility among local populations. The nearly comparable scores suggest that men and women in Abono participate similarly in environmental conservation initiatives. However, examining the intersections of gender with other social factors, such as age and education, might yield deeper insights into perceptions of empowerment. For example, younger individuals or those with higher levels of education might perceive empowerment differently, potentially leading to variations in environmental empowerment engagement. Future research could explore these intersections to provide a richer understanding of ecotourism's impact across diverse community segments.

In terms of economic empowerment, men may perceive ecotourism as offering slightly greater financial benefits than women do; however, there was no statistically significant gender difference. A study by Xu, Cui, and Ballantyne (2021) demonstrated that while ecotourism can have a positive economic impact on people's lives, gender disparities in income persist due to limited access to resources and employment opportunities. The results imply that ecotourism does offer economic opportunities for all genders in the community, even though women may not benefit as directly as men do. This is not surprising as women's involvement in ecotourism is limited to selling food as traditionally. They are prohibited from being active in the lake, explaining why they are only involved in selling processed fish and food to visitors. The study also identified social empowerment as the next important dimension, particularly for women rather than men, indicating that women may perceive more social benefits from ecotourism. This finding aligns with recent research indicating that ecotourism often provides



social benefits to women by promoting social cohesion and creating opportunities for networking and community leadership (Alrwajfah, Almeida-García, & Cortés-Macías, 2019).

The study reveals a relatively low perception of political empowerment, suggesting that neither men nor women feel they possess significant decision-making authority in the governance of ecotourism. This observation supports the conclusion of Rasoolimanesh et al. (2021), who argued that while ecotourism has the potential to alter power dynamics, political empowerment often remains limited, particularly in patriarchal societies. The findings highlight the need for increased political participation to ensure that both women and men can equally engage in ecotourism-related decision-making.

Interestingly, both genders appear to attach less importance to cultural empowerment, suggesting that ecotourism may not be perceived as contributing significantly to cultural preservation. In contrast, recent research suggests that community-based ecotourism can serve as a means of cultural revitalization, particularly when communities actively promote their cultural heritage (Kim & Badu-Baiden, 2022). The low level of cultural empowerment underscores the importance of integrating and weaving cultural elements effectively into ecotourism to enhance local cultural identity, as this is an important component sought by tourists.

### **Comparison of Local Support for Ecotourism**

The study found that men expressed slightly greater support for ecotourism than women; however, this difference was not statistically significant. This result is consistent with Xu et al. (2019), who reported that both genders involved in ecotourism generally exhibit similar levels of support, likely due to the equal opportunities ecotourism provides within the community. Indeed, shared socioeconomic interests may explain this phenomenon (Sun & Yang, 2020). Both men and women view ecotourism as a source of financial benefit and empowerment, and also the observed psychological empowerment may further contribute to the high levels of support from both genders, as noted by Boley et al. (2014).

### **Comparison of Willingness to Undertake Political Action**

The study identified a significant difference in the willingness to engage in political action between men and women, indicating varying levels of willingness to do so. This observation is in sharp contrast with the overall observation of perceived low political participation and may be influenced by economic disparities between genders. Previous research on inclusive community engagement suggests that gender does not significantly affect participation in political activities related to community-based ecotourism (Mbaiwa & Stronza, 2011). Also, Palomo et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of gender parity in political engagement for the sustainability of ecotourism initiatives, while Boley et al. (2017) note that inclusive political participation enhances community empowerment by enabling both men and women to benefit equally from ecotourism.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study found only marginal, non-significant differences in how men and women perceive various aspects of empowerment in ecotourism. However, both genders highly value psychological and environmental empowerment, while political and cultural empowerment are rated relatively low. Modest disparities were observed in perceptions of economic and social empowerment. Overall, participation in ecotourism is perceived by both men and women as enhancing personal growth and environmental responsibility. However, neither gender believes that ecotourism has substantially improved their political or cultural status, indicating a need for further efforts in these areas. While ecotourism contributes positively to gender empowerment, improvements are needed, particularly in political inclusion and cultural preservation. A critical question arises: What shared governance model could enable Abono women to co-author the future of ecotourism? Addressing this could spark meaningful collaboration and represent a significant forward-looking equity challenge in ecotourism.

The absence of significant gender differences in local support suggests the potential for unified community action to enhance ecotourism initiatives. Nevertheless, further research is required to understand gender-specific interactions with ecotourism, particularly regarding roles and decision-making contributions. Despite generally low political participation, a significant difference in willingness to engage in political action was observed between men and women. This highlights the importance of supporting sustainable ecotourism practices and

advocating for community interests through political engagement, especially for women who may face disadvantages in patriarchal societies. Developing inclusive governance that encourages participation from all genders requires a deeper understanding of the dynamics of political action within communities.

### Policy and Practical Implications

Developing effective policies to enhance political and cultural empowerment through ecotourism is essential. With ecotourism accommodated within a biosphere reserve, managers and policymakers should consider implementing participatory governance model that include both men and women in decision-making processes for ecotourism development. This could involve setting quota for female representation on tourism committees to ensure that women's voices are adequately heard and considered in governance. Additionally, creating platforms for cultural exchange and preserving local cultural practices can strengthen cultural empowerment. A major observation was women's restricted access to other ecotourism activities on the lake because of traditions. Initiatives focused on engagement with traditional authorities, training and capacity building can create opportunities increasing women involvement in such activities and equipping them with the skills necessary to manage and lead ecotourism enterprises, fostering women's economic empowerment. Encouraging collaboration between local government, NGOs and the private sector can provide the resources and infrastructure needed to support these enterprises, ensuring the benefits of ecotourism are equitably distributed and contribute to sustainable community development in Abono.

The study has limitations related to methodology, context and analysis that should be considered when interpreting the results. Methodologically, the study's reliance on quantitative survey limits the depth of understanding that could be gained from respondents' experiences. Future studies could benefit from qualitative interviews or focus groups to capture richer details. Contextually, the study focused solely on Abono community, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other communities with different socioeconomic or cultural dynamics. Analytically, the scope was limited to certain dimensions of empowerment, potentially overlooking other relevant aspects or demographic factors that could offer additional insights.

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### Declaration Of Interest

None

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