



Tourism Business Ecosystem for Rural Women: A Stakeholder Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The success and sustainability of businesses of rural women depend not only on women's individual capabilities but also on a set of environmental, institutional, cultural, and economic factors—known as the "business ecosystem." The present study aims to quantitatively and qualitatively assess the status of the tourism business ecosystem for rural women in two counties, Soume'e sara and Foومان (Gilan Province), and to identify the most important barriers and solutions for its improvement. This research is applied in purpose and survey-descriptive in method, with a quantitative approach and qualitative content analysis. The statistical population included 50 rural women working in tourism (including entrepreneurs, employees, home-based businesses, and local vendors) and 42 local managers (village heads, council members, and cultural heritage experts), selected through a census method. The findings indicate that the overall status of the rural women's tourism business ecosystem from both perspectives is highly unfavorable (overall mean of 1.84 for women and 1.87 for managers out of 5). From the perspective of rural women, the components of "human capital" (1.65), "social" (1.79), and "business" (1.84) are the weakest, while "infrastructure and technology" (2.64) is the relatively most acceptable component. From the perspective of local managers, the components of "infrastructure and technology" (0.9), "social" (1.85), and "business" (1.87) are the weakest, while "culture" (2.95), "support" (2.69), and "education" (2.54) are in a moderate status. This research suggests that policy-making for the development of women's entrepreneurship in rural tourism should be based on three main pillars: "human capital empowerment," "improvement of soft and hard infrastructure," and "changing cultural attitudes."

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Introduction

In the contemporary era, the economic and social development of any country is increasingly tied to the active participation of various social groups, especially women, in productive and service activities. Women, as half of the population of any society, not only constitute a vast human resource but also, as agents of change and innovation in the family and society, play an irreplaceable role in the process of sustainable development (Habibi et al., 2019). Despite this enormous potential, statistical evidence in Iran shows that women's share in formal economic activities is only about 16%, and this rate is significantly lower in rural areas, often manifesting in the form of hidden, unpaid, and low-productivity jobs (Ghanbari et al., 2017; Statistical Center of Iran, 2021).

In rural areas, numerous structural, cultural, and economic barriers hinder women's stable presence and activity in the field of entrepreneurship. These barriers include limited access to production resources (land, capital, credit), gender discrimination in the labor market, the double burden of household responsibilities, lack of supportive infrastructure (such as childcare centers), traditional attitudes and gender stereotypes regarding women's roles and status, and the lack of technical and managerial skills appropriate to today's market needs (Zarafshani et al., 2012; Mohammadi & Mohammadsharifi, 2019; Lopez-Estrada et al., 2023). Alongside these barriers, major economic trends such as rising unemployment rates, declining profitability of traditional agriculture, increasing rural-to-urban male migration, and changing consumption patterns have made the need to find new employment and income generation paths for rural women more evident than ever (Jamshidi et al., 2013; Amidi, 2022).

In this context, tourism, as one of the largest and fastest-growing industries in the world, with unique characteristics such as high employment capacity, the possibility of using semi-skilled labor, the ability to integrate with other local activities (agriculture, handicrafts, services), and flexibility in business scale, can serve as an effective strategy for attracting and empowering rural women in areas with tourism attractions (Ghanian et al., 2010; Nouri, 2019; Movono & Dahles, 2020). Rural tourism, especially in forms based on community-based tourism and ecotourism, not only can contribute to diversifying the rural economy and increasing household income but also, by providing diverse job opportunities in areas such as eco-lodges, traditional restaurants, local guiding, selling handicrafts and organic agricultural products, provides a platform for improving women's social and economic status, increasing self-confidence, developing communication and management skills, and ultimately reducing their economic dependence (Amiri, 2011; Hosseini, 2021; Gutiérrez Cruz et al., 2020).

However, the mere existence of natural and cultural potentials for tourism does not, in itself, guarantee the formation and success of women's tourism businesses. Numerous studies have shown that small and micro businesses in the tourism sector, especially those launched by women in rural areas, face a high failure rate, often not due to the individual capabilities of the entrepreneurs but because of the shortcomings and inadequacies of the surrounding environment—namely, the "business ecosystem" (Kalabi, 2022; Hosseini Kahnouj et al., 2021; Isenberg, 2011). The concept of the business ecosystem, first introduced by James Moore (1993), is based on the premise that the success of any economic enterprise, beyond its internal capabilities, depends on the quality of interactions and network, institutional, and environmental supports in which it operates. In other words, an entrepreneurial business requires a favorable "habitat" that includes access to financial capital, skilled labor, appropriate markets,

supportive laws, social and cultural support networks, physical and technological infrastructure, and continuous training (Spigel, 2017; Stam, 2015).

According to this theoretical framework, the fundamental question is whether the current tourism business ecosystem in the rural areas under study (Soume'e sara and Fooman counties in Gilan Province) is favorable for supporting women's entrepreneurship and the sustainability of their businesses or not? And if unfavorable, which components are most damaged, and from the perspective of key stakeholders (the women entrepreneurs themselves and local managers), what solutions exist for its improvement? Answering these questions constitutes the main objective of the present research.

Gilan Province, as one of the important hubs of domestic tourism in Iran, hosts millions of domestic and foreign tourists annually and, due to its biodiversity, natural attractions (sea, forest, wetland, mountains), rich historical and cultural context, and diverse handicrafts, has high potential for the development of rural tourism (Sedighi Gildeh, 2017). Soume'e sara and Fooman counties, due to their proximity and cultural, economic, and geographical commonalities (especially being located in the plains region with rice cultivation and proximity to Anzali Wetland and historical and natural attractions), are suitable areas for a comparative study of the status of women's tourism businesses (Yegani & Yaghoubi, 2021; Soume'e sara Governor's Office, 2023).

The research background in Iran has mainly focused on identifying individual and family barriers to rural women's entrepreneurship (Vakil Heydari Sarban, 2012; Yaghoubi Farani et al., 2013) or examining factors affecting entrepreneurship development from a one-dimensional perspective (Ahmadi et al., 2019; Rafiee et al., 2020). Also, several recent studies have assessed the tourism entrepreneurship ecosystem in rural areas (Akbari Samani et al., 2020; Hosseini Kahnouj et al., 2021; Dadk Kouhi, 2022; Hedayati Sarsar, 2023), but fewer studies have used a comparative approach of the perspectives of two main stakeholder groups (women entrepreneurs and local managers) and a conceptual model combining the theories of Moore, Isenberg, and Spigel to accurately measure ecosystem components at the local level. On the other hand, the content analysis of barriers and proposed solutions by local managers, as one of the methodological innovations of this research, can provide deeper insight into the gap between the perspectives of planners and local implementers and women entrepreneurs.

Therefore, the necessity of this research is clearly felt in filling the existing knowledge gap regarding the systematic and multidimensional assessment of the tourism business ecosystem for rural women, especially in an area with high tourism potential but a low rate of sustainable women's participation. The results of this research can serve as a basis for rational policy-making, targeted resource allocation, and designing effective intervention programs by governmental institutions (such as the Cultural Heritage Organization, Agricultural Jihad, Housing Foundation, Provincial Management and Planning Organization) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs, microcredit funds, women's cooperatives).

The main objective of this research is to measure and analyze the status of the tourism business ecosystem for rural women in Soume'e sara and Fooman counties and to identify the most important barriers and solutions for its improvement.

Specific Objectives:

1. Quantitative evaluation of the 9 components of the business ecosystem (business, financial resources, education, human capital, support, market, social, cultural,

infrastructure and technology) from the perspective of rural women working in tourism and local managers.

2. Comparing the ranking of components from the perspective of the two stakeholder groups and identifying points of agreement and disagreement.

3. Identifying the most important internal and external barriers (at micro and macro levels) facing the development of women's tourism businesses based on the experience of local managers.

4. Providing evidence-based policy solutions for improving the business ecosystem and economic empowerment of rural women.

Research Questions:

1. What is the status of the 9 components of the tourism business ecosystem for rural women in the study area from the perspective of working women and local managers, and how are they ranked?

2. What are the most important strengths and weaknesses of the ecosystem from the perspective of both groups, and what significant differences exist between the perspectives?

3. What are the most important internal barriers (related to women themselves, family, and local community) and external barriers (related to policies, laws, infrastructure, and macro-economy) for the growth of these businesses?

4. What are the strategic priorities for improving the ecosystem from the perspective of local managers and women entrepreneurs?

Theoretical Foundations

The Concept of Business Ecosystem: From Ecology to Economics

The etymology of the term "ecosystem" goes back to ecology. Ernst Haeckel, a German biologist, first used the term ecology in 1866 to study the interrelationships between living organisms and their environment. Then in 1935, Arthur Tansley, a British ecologist, introduced the term "ecosystem" as a dynamic and integrated system including biotic (living organisms) and abiotic (physical and chemical environment) components (Peltoniemi & Vuori, 2008). This foundational concept was later gradually introduced into the humanities and management sciences and today has found wide application in various fields including economics, entrepreneurship, economic geography, and regional planning (Jahanizadeh et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2024).

The most important characteristics of a natural ecosystem that have been generalized to business ecosystems are: a) interdependence of components, such that a change in one component affects the entire system; b) co-evolution, meaning that actors adapt to each other and to the environment over time; c) self-organization, meaning that the system maintains its internal order and structure without the need for centralized control; d) dynamism and resilience against environmental shocks; and e) blurred boundaries that make it difficult to precisely identify components and inputs and outputs (Anggraeni et al., 2007; Banka & Uchihira, 2024).

In the field of strategic management and entrepreneurship, James Moore in 1993, with the publication of his influential article "Predators and Prey: A New Ecology of Competition" in the Harvard Business Review, introduced the concept of the business ecosystem as a new paradigm for analyzing competition in the modern economy (Moore, 1993). Moore argued that in the age of information and globalization, the boundaries of traditional industries are collapsing, and competition is no longer between individual companies but among networks of organizations, suppliers, customers, governmental and non-governmental institutions that form an "economic community"

(Moore, 1996; 1998). He defined the business ecosystem as "an economic community supported by a foundation of interacting organizations and individuals—the organisms of the business world," which includes customers, suppliers, major producers, competitors, and other stakeholders, and this community forms around an innovation or shared value and develops co-evolutionarily (Moore, 1996, p. 76).

Moore (1996) also divided the life cycle of business ecosystems into four main stages: "birth, expansion, leadership, and self-renewal," and emphasized the role of "keystone species" (such as leading companies, regulatory bodies, and support networks) in guiding this process. In his view, at each stage, ecosystem actors must adopt specific strategies for survival and growth, and failure at any stage can lead to the collapse of the entire ecosystem (Bayat Tork, 2023; Hedayati Sarsar, 2023).

Main Models of Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

With the expansion of the business ecosystem concept, various models have been proposed for its operationalization and measurement in the field of entrepreneurship. In this section, three influential models that form the basis of the conceptual model of the present research are reviewed.

Isenberg's Model (Isenberg, 2010; 2011)

Daniel Isenberg, one of the prominent theorists in the field of entrepreneurial ecosystems, presented a model specifically focused on institutional and environmental factors affecting the formation and growth of startups. Isenberg's model includes six key components:

1. Policy: including laws, regulations, tax policies, licensing facilities, investment incentives, government support for entrepreneurship, and political stability.
2. Finance: access to diverse financial resources including venture capital, bank loans, grants, microcredit funds, angel investment, and family financial support.
3. Culture: society's attitude toward entrepreneurship, acceptance of failure, respect for success, individualism, risk-taking, creativity and innovation, and gender roles in local culture.
4. Support: the existence of supportive institutions, support infrastructure, consulting services, incubators, science and technology parks, industry associations, and professional networks.
5. Human Capital: access to skilled and specialized labor, education level, technical and managerial skills, entrepreneurial experience, specialized training, and workforce quality.
6. Markets: access to domestic and foreign markets, potential customers, suppliers, distribution channels, competition, and demand for new products and services (Isenberg, 2011, p. 6).

Isenberg emphasizes that these six components must not only be strengthened individually but their interactions and interconnections are also vital for creating a healthy and dynamic ecosystem. He also warns that entrepreneurial ecosystems cannot be copied from one region to another, because each region has its own unique history, culture, institutions, and capacities, and entrepreneurship development policies must be tailored to that local context (Isenberg, 2010).

Spigel's Model (Spigel, 2017)

Ben Spigel, criticizing purely institutional models, presented a model that places greater emphasis on the social and relational aspects of the ecosystem. Spigel's model defines the entrepreneurial ecosystem as "a combination of cultural, social, and material factors in a specific geographic location" that interact with each other and create a

favorable environment for entrepreneurship. This model includes three main categories of factors:

- Cultural Attributes: including collective attitudes, values, and beliefs, such as risk tolerance, respect for entrepreneurship, ambition, flexibility, and success stories (role models) that inspire new entrepreneurs.
- Social Attributes: including social networks, social capital, trust, cooperation, informal communications, and civil organizations that facilitate knowledge transfer and resource attraction.
- Material Attributes: including physical infrastructure (roads, transportation, buildings), digital infrastructure (internet, information technology), financial resources, universities and research centers, as well as supportive policies (Spigel, 2017, pp. 52-56).

Spigel emphasizes that these three categories of factors dynamically and recursively influence each other, and the formation of a successful ecosystem requires their harmonious combination. In particular, he considers the role of "key actors" (such as successful entrepreneurs, local investors, university administrators, and social leaders) as central to creating and maintaining this combination.

Stam's Model (Stam, 2015)

Erik Stam, a Dutch economist, presented an integrated model of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in which Framework Conditions and Systemic Conditions are distinguished. According to Stam, framework conditions include contextual factors such as culture, institutions, physical infrastructure, market demand, and skilled labor, while systemic conditions include networks, entrepreneurial leadership, financial capital, knowledge and support services, and interactions among these factors. He believes that the output of the ecosystem (number and quality of startups) is a function of the interaction between these conditions and not simply their sum (Stam, 2015; Hedayati Sarsar, 2023).

Women's Entrepreneurship in Rural Tourism: Opportunities and Challenges

The tourism sector, especially at the local and rural scale, due to its service-oriented nature and high labor intensity, provides suitable opportunities for women's entrepreneurship. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) acknowledges in its various reports that women constitute a significant share of employment in the tourism sector, but this presence is often concentrated in low-value, part-time, seasonal, and low-wage jobs (UNWTO, 2019; Sabina & Nicolae, 2013). On the other hand, rural tourism, due to the possibility of using traditional skills (cooking, handicrafts, organic farming, hospitality), flexibility in working hours, and the possibility of performing many activities in the home environment, provides a relatively suitable platform for women's entry into entrepreneurship (Pasban & Talebi, 2021; Gutiérrez Cruz et al., 2020; Lenao & Saarinen, 2015).

However, women entrepreneurs in rural tourism face numerous challenges rooted in structural and contextual conditions. International research shows that the most important of these challenges are:

- Limited access to financial resources and capital: Women compared to men have less access to bank loans, venture capital, and other financial resources, and often have to rely on personal savings or family assistance (Rieger, 2012; Kille et al., 2022).
- Cultural barriers and gender stereotypes: In many rural communities, women's primary role is defined as homemaker and family caregiver, and their economic activity is considered a secondary or complementary activity. Gender stereotypes question

women's abilities in financial management, strategic decision-making, and business negotiation (Ahmadi & Rusta, 2011; Surangi, 2022; Sobaih & Abu Elnasr, 2024).

- Lack of education and management skills: Many rural women, especially those without higher formal education, lack basic business management skills, marketing, accounting, strategic planning, and the use of digital technologies (Yaghoubi Farani et al., 2013; Aghdasi et al., 2023).

- Weak support infrastructure: Lack of childcare centers, lack of appropriate public transportation, lack of stable internet and consulting services, as well as the absence of effective networks for cooperation and marketing, are serious barriers facing women entrepreneurs (Hosseini Kahnouj et al., 2021; Radosavljevic et al., 2022).

- Seasonality of tourism: Sharp fluctuations in income in different seasons make cash flow management and business planning difficult for women and threaten their sustainability (Surangi, 2022).

Domestic research has also largely confirmed these challenges. For example, Vakil Heydari Sarban (2012) using the AHP method in Ardabil Province identified socio-cultural barriers as the most important obstacle to rural women's entrepreneurship. Also, Yaghoubi Farani et al. (2013) categorized the barriers to women's tendency toward home-based businesses into six categories: socio-cultural, infrastructural-financial, personality, support, family, and educational. Ahmadi et al. (2019), in a meta-analysis of 47 domestic studies, identified individual factors (human capital, creativity), financial and economic support, cultural-educational factors, and improvement of environmental infrastructure as the most important factors affecting the development of rural women's entrepreneurship.

Based on these foundations, the present research has developed a combined conceptual model (derived from the models of Isenberg, Spigel, and Stam) for measuring the tourism business ecosystem of rural women, which includes 9 main components (business, financial resources, education, human capital, support, market, social, cultural, and infrastructure-technology).

Methodology

This research is applied-developmental in purpose, as it seeks to provide practical solutions for improving the status of women's tourism businesses, and its results can be used in regional and national planning. In terms of data collection method, it is a survey research in which quantitative data were collected using a questionnaire from two main stakeholder groups. Also, by using open-ended questions in the local managers' questionnaire, qualitative content analysis was also conducted to identify and categorize barriers and solutions. In terms of time dimension, the research is cross-sectional, and the data were collected in a specific time period (spring and summer 2024).

The statistical population of this research consists of two separate groups:

First Group: Rural Women Working in Tourism

This group includes women who are involved in tourism-related businesses in the villages of Soume'e sara and Fooman counties. The inclusion criteria for the study were: 1) residing in one of the tourism-target villages of these two counties, 2) working in one of the tourism-related occupations (including entrepreneurship, restaurant and accommodation staff, handicraft sellers, home-based businesses, producers of local food products, local guides, etc.), 3) willingness to cooperate and respond to the questionnaire. Based on information received from the Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization of Gilan Province and the researcher's field survey, the total number of women working in this field in the two counties was estimated at about 373

people (127 in Soume'e sara and 246 in Fooman). Due to access limitations and non-cooperation of some individuals, finally 50 people (25 from each county) were selected through available census method who completed the questionnaire fully.

Second Group: Local Managers

This group included village heads, members of Islamic village councils, and experts from the Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Department, who, due to their awareness of the region's situation and tourism businesses, could provide a macro and institutional perspective. From each county, 20 village heads and council members (total of 40 people) were purposefully and conveniently selected, and 2 cultural heritage experts were added to this number, bringing the total of the second group to 42 people. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the statistical population in detail.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Research Statistical Population

Group	County	Estimated Total	Available Sample
Rural women in tourism	Soume'e sara	127	25
Rural women in tourism	Fooman	246	25
Local managers (village heads & councils)	Soume'e sara	25	20
Local managers (village heads & councils)	Fooman	28	20
Cultural heritage experts	Gilan Province	5	2
Total		430	92

The main data collection tool was a researcher-made questionnaire designed in two separate sections. The main data collection tool was a researcher-made questionnaire designed in two separate versions for rural women and local managers. The questionnaire design was based on the conceptual model of the research (which combines the models of Isenberg, Spigel, and Stam) and drawing on the background of domestic and international research.

The structure of the rural women's questionnaire included two sections:

- First section: Demographic information (including age, education level, type of business, entrepreneurial experience, and village of residence and employment).
- Second section: Measuring the 9 ecosystem components with 47 items on a five-point Likert scale (1=very low to 5=very high). These components were: business (5 items), financial resources (7 items), education (7 items), human capital (3 items), support (4 items), market (3 items), social (4 items), cultural (8 items), and infrastructure and technology (6 items).

The structure of the local managers' questionnaire also included the same 47 items, but with slight changes in wording to suit their supervisory and managerial role. Also, at the end of the managers' questionnaire, three open-ended questions were included to identify the most important barriers, solutions, and priorities for improving the ecosystem.

The pilot test of the questionnaires was conducted on 15 women and 10 local managers (outside the main sample), and based on their feedback, necessary revisions were made to the ambiguities and incomprehensibilities of the questions.

Content validity was assessed using the "expert judgment" method. The initial questionnaire was given to three faculty members of the Department of Human Geography and Planning at the University of Tehran (including the supervisor and advisor) and also to two senior experts from the Cultural Heritage Organization of Gilan Province. While confirming the appropriateness of the items with the research objectives, they provided suggestions for modifying some phrases and removing one duplicate item, which were implemented. The Content Validity Ratio (CVR) for all

items was calculated to be higher than 0.79, indicating favorable content validity (Lawshe, 1975).

Reliability of the questionnaire was calculated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The results of this test for both questionnaires are as follows:

- Rural women's questionnaire: total alpha coefficient of 0.907 and component alpha coefficients between 0.707 and 0.831 (Table 2).

- Local managers' questionnaire: total alpha coefficient of 0.871 and component alpha coefficients between 0.767 and 0.889 (Table 2).

All coefficients are above 0.70, indicating acceptable reliability and favorable internal consistency of the measurement instrument (Cronbach, 1951; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients for Ecosystem Components

Component	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (Women)	Cronbach's Alpha (Managers)
Business	5	0.777	0.835
Financial Resources	7	0.707	0.767
Education	7	0.737	0.806
Human Capital	3	0.831	0.870
Support	4	0.727	0.861
Market	3	0.822	0.878
Social	4	0.818	0.805
Cultural	8	0.730	0.821
Infrastructure & Technology	6	0.728	0.889
Total Questionnaire	47	0.907	0.871

Source: Research findings, 2024

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS version 26 software. At the descriptive statistics level, central tendency indicators (mean, median, mode) and dispersion indicators (standard deviation, range, minimum and maximum values) were calculated for each item and component. For interpreting the means, an interval scale with a cutoff point of 2.5 was used: means below 2.5 indicate an "unfavorable" status (with subcategories of "highly unfavorable" for values below 2 and "unfavorable" for 2 to 2.49), means between 2.5 and 3 indicate a "moderate" status, means between 3 and 4 indicate a "favorable" status, and means above 4 indicate a "highly favorable" status (Kalabi, 2022; Hedayati Sarsar, 2023).

For the analysis of qualitative data from the open-ended questions of the local managers' questionnaire, the Directed Content Analysis method was used. This means that the textual responses were first read word by word, then initial codes were extracted, and after merging similar codes, the main concepts were organized in the form of a barriers matrix (based on internal-external and micro-macro classification). To increase the credibility of the qualitative analysis, the "member checking" method was used, and a summary of the coding was sent to 5 managers for confirmation.

3-6. Introduction to the Study Area

Gilan Province, with an area of 14,000 square kilometers, is located in northern Iran, bordering the Caspian Sea. Due to its temperate and humid climate, Hyrcanian forests, Anzali International Wetland, Alborz mountains, sandy beaches, tea and rice gardens, and numerous historical and cultural heritage sites (such as Rudkhan Castle, the historical city of Masouleh, and holy shrines), it is considered one of the main destinations for domestic tourism (Safavi et al., 2017). According to the latest statistics,

Gilan Province hosted more than 1.4 million tourists in 2021 (Statistical Center of Iran, 2022).

Soume'e sara County, with an area of 588 square kilometers, is located in the west of Gilan Province and is bordered by Anzali Wetland to the north, Rasht to the east, Fooman and Shaft to the south, and Masal and Rezvanshahr to the west. The population of this county, according to the latest census (2016), is about 129,629 people, and it has 4 districts (Central, Tolem, Taher Gurab, and Mirza Koochak) and 7 rural districts. Soume'e sara's tourist attractions include Anzali Wetland (in the northern part), the brick minaret of Gaskar, historical bridges (Khesht Pol), numerous holy shrines, the summer resort areas of Gandarji and Khunbarji, and local markets (such as the Sunday market) (Soume'e sara Governor's Office, 2023). However, tourism infrastructure in this county, especially in rural areas, is relatively weak, and most tourism activities are spontaneous and family-oriented (field survey findings).

Fooman County, with an area of 936 square kilometers, is located in the southwest of Gilan Province and is bordered by Soume'e sara to the north, the Alborz mountain range to the south and southwest (border with Zanjan Province), Rasht to the east, and Masal to the west. The population of this county is about 96,788 people (Statistical Center of Iran, 2016). Fooman is recognized as one of the most important tourism hubs in Gilan Province and has more than 26 registered tourist attractions, accounting for 25% of the total attractions in the province (Sedighi Gildeh, 2017). Its most important attractions include Rudkhan Castle (one of the largest stone castles in Iran), the historical city of Masouleh (with its terraced architecture registered in the national heritage), the protected area of Gasht Rudkhan and Siah Mazgi, Fooman summer resorts, Fooman's historical bridge (Khesht Pol), and numerous holy shrines (Shahbazi & Hajarian, 2019; Yegani & Yaghoubi, 2021). The presence of these attractions has made Fooman a more well-known tourism destination than Soume'e sara, and consequently, the number of tourism businesses (especially in the areas of eco-lodges, traditional restaurants, handicraft sales, and cookie making) and women's employment in this field is significantly higher (field survey findings).

Results and Discussion

Demographic Analysis of Respondents

Characteristics of Rural Women Working in Tourism

Among the 50 women participants, 54% (27 people) had a diploma, 12% (6 people) had below diploma education, 12% (6 people) had a bachelor's degree, 6% (3 people) had an associate degree, and 16% (8 people) did not mention their education. A notable point was that none of the respondents had specialized education in tourism or related fields. Regarding entrepreneurial experience, 66% (33 people) stated that they had launched their own business (often family-run with participation of their husband or father) and 34% (17 people) worked as employees or colleagues in others' businesses.

Characteristics of Local Managers

Among 42 local managers, 86% (36 people) were male and 14% (6 people) were female. The largest age group was 40-50 years (16 people, 38%) followed by 50-60 years (14 people, 33%). Their education level was mainly diploma (22 people, 52%) and bachelor's (13 people, 31%). Work experience of less than 10 years (19 people, 45%) had the highest frequency.

Gender distribution of local managers is male 86% and Female 14%. Finally, age distribution of local managers is under 40 years 12%, 40-50 years 38%, 50-60 years 33%, Over 60 years 14%.

Status of Ecosystem Components from the Perspective of Rural Women

Table 3 shows the descriptive analysis results of the 9 ecosystem components from the perspective of rural women. The overall mean of all components is 1.84 (out of 5), which falls within the "highly unfavorable" range.

Table 3. Status of Ecosystem Components from the Perspective of Rural Women

Rank	Component	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Status
1	Infrastructure & Technology	2.64	1.09	1	4.67	Moderate
2	Cultural	2.43	1.07	1	4.75	Unfavorable
3	Market	2.39	1.22	1	5.00	Unfavorable
4	Support	1.98	1.01	1	4.50	Highly Unfavorable
5	Financial Resources	1.96	0.94	1	4.43	Highly Unfavorable
6	Education	1.87	0.92	1	4.57	Highly Unfavorable
7	Business	1.84	0.94	1	4.80	Highly Unfavorable
8	Social	1.79	0.74	1	3.25	Highly Unfavorable
9	Human Capital	1.65	0.78	1	4.00	Highly Unfavorable
Overall Mean		1.84	0.93	1	4.50	

Source: Research findings, 2024

The disaggregated results for each component show that in the human capital component (the weakest component with a mean of 1.65), the item "access to technical experts and business consultants" with a mean of 1.50 and the item "access to skilled tourism workforce" with a mean of 1.70 had the lowest scores. This indicates a serious lack of consulting services and specialized human resources in the villages. In the social component (mean 1.79), the items "holding competitions and conferences related to business" with a mean of 1.66 and "existence of formal support networks" with a mean of 1.76 were evaluated as very weak.

On the opposite side, the infrastructure and technology component with a mean of 2.64 is in a "moderate" status and is the only component that has passed the cutoff point of 2.5. Examination of its items shows that "access to basic services (water, electricity, gas)" with a mean of 3.34 (in favorable status) and "access to transportation" with a mean of 2.90 (moderate) received the highest scores, while "access to information and communication technology (ICT)" with a mean of 2.08 and "access to support services" with a mean of 2.12 are still weak.

Status of Components from the Perspective of Local Managers

Table 4 shows the component analysis results from the perspective of 42 local managers. The overall mean is 1.87, which again falls within the "highly unfavorable" range, but is slightly higher than the women's perspective mean.

Table 4. Status of Ecosystem Components from the Perspective of Local Managers

Rank	Component	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Status
1	Cultural	2.95	0.79	1.13	4.63	Moderate
2	Support	2.69	0.71	1	4.00	Moderate
3	Education	2.54	0.76	1	4.00	Moderate
4	Market	2.26	0.67	1	3.67	Unfavorable
5	Financial Resources	2.22	0.79	1	4.00	Unfavorable
6	Human Capital	2.10	0.75	1	3.33	Unfavorable
7	Business	1.87	0.79	1	3.80	Highly

						Unfavorable	
8	Social		1.85	0.63	1	3.00	Highly Unfavorable
9	Infrastructure & Technology		0.90	2.80	1	4.67	Highly Unfavorable
Overall Mean			1.87	0.72	1	3.33	

Source: Research findings, 2024

A notable point in Table 4 is the different ranking of components compared to the women's perspective. From the managers' perspective, the cultural component with a mean of 2.95 is ranked first (strongest), while from the women's perspective, culture was ranked second and in an "unfavorable" status. This difference indicates that local managers have a more positive attitude toward cultural support and local values, but women perceive themselves as facing more cultural barriers (including gender discrimination with a mean of 2.64 and insufficient support for women's achievements with a mean of 2.00).

The support component (mean 2.69) and education (mean 2.54) are also in a moderate status from the managers' perspective, indicating the existence of some support and educational infrastructure at the regional level, although insufficient. In contrast, the infrastructure and technology component with a mean of 0.90 (which, due to the high range of variation and standard deviation of 2.80, indicates a wide dispersion of opinions) is considered the weakest component from the managers' perspective. Closer examination shows that managers particularly emphasized the weakness of high-speed internet, rural roads, and public transportation.

Comparative Analysis of the Two Groups' Perspectives

Table 5 presents a simultaneous comparison of the ranking and mean of each component from the perspective of the two stakeholder groups. For ease of interpretation, the symbols "<" (managers' mean higher than women's), ">" (managers' mean lower than women's), and "≈" (close means) are used.

Table 5. Comparative Analysis of Ecosystem Components from the Perspective of Two Groups

Component	Mean (Women)	Rank (Women)	Mean (Managers)	Rank (Managers)	Difference	Consensus Status
Business	1.84	7	1.87	7	≈	Both unfavorable highly
Financial Resources	1.96	5	2.22	5	<	Both unfavorable
Education	1.87	6	2.54	3	<	Managers moderate, women highly unfavorable
Human Capital	1.65	9	2.10	6	<	Both unfavorable
Support	1.98	4	2.69	2	<	Managers moderate, women highly unfavorable
Market	2.39	3	2.26	4	>	Both unfavorable
Social	1.79	8	1.85	8	≈	Both unfavorable highly
Cultural	2.43	2	2.95	1	<	Managers moderate, women unfavorable
Infrastructure &	2.64	1	0.90	9	>>	Sharp contradiction

Based on Table 5, the most important comparative findings are:

1. Relative agreement on weak components: Both groups agree on the severe weakness of the "social," "business," and "human capital" components (with slight differences). This indicates the lack of effective social networks, entrepreneurial culture, and skilled human resources in the region.
2. Deep gap in the "infrastructure and technology" component: This component is ranked first (strongest) from the women's perspective and last (weakest) from the managers' perspective. This sharp contradiction can be attributed to two factors: a) Women find infrastructure acceptable due to their relative access to water, electricity, and gas in the villages, while managers pay attention to the lack of larger-scale infrastructure such as main roads, high-speed internet, and public transportation. b) Managers are responsible for infrastructure development and feel the failure in this area more acutely than women.
3. Gap in the "education," "support," and "cultural" components: Managers have assessed these three components as being in a moderate status, while women consider them unfavorable or highly unfavorable. This gap indicates a mismatch between the services provided by institutions (which managers are aware of) and the actual perception and benefit of women from these services. In other words, educational and support programs may exist, but either they do not reach women or are not aligned with their needs.

Conclusion

The present research showed that the tourism business ecosystem for rural women in Soume'e sara and Fooman counties is in a highly unfavorable condition. Out of the 9 components examined, almost all are in the "unfavorable" or "highly unfavorable" range, and only the "infrastructure and technology" component from the rural women's perspective was assessed at a moderate level, although from the local managers' perspective it is considered the weakest component. The severe weakness of soft components (human capital, social, and cultural) especially from the women's perspective, and the agreement of both groups on the weakness of business and social components, indicate the existence of fundamental gaps in entrepreneurial skills, support networks, access to consultants, and appropriate markets.

The most important identified barriers are: lack of physical infrastructure (especially internet and transportation), household financial weakness, lack of government financial support, weakness in skills training, economic recession, and cultural barriers (gender stereotypes and lack of family support). The difference in perspective between women entrepreneurs and local managers on key components such as infrastructure, education, and support indicates a gap between the programs provided by institutions and the actual perception and benefit of women, revealing the necessity of designing participatory and feedback-oriented programs.

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are presented at three levels: short-term, medium-term, and long-term.

Short-term recommendations (1-2 years):

1. Creating a one-stop-shop for business licensing: Facilitate the licensing process by establishing service offices at the county level and providing free consultation to women entrepreneurs to reduce administrative bureaucracy.

2. Organizing intensive practical workshops: Design and implement short-term training courses (2-5 days) in financial management, local marketing, product packaging, hospitality, and using social media for handicraft sales.

3. Establishing local microcredit funds: With the participation of village headmen, councils, and NGOs, create interest-free loan funds to provide working capital for women entrepreneurs.

4. Holding seasonal festivals and permanent marketplaces: In tourism-target villages, establish marketplaces for selling handicrafts and local products so women can offer their products directly to tourists without intermediaries.

Medium-term recommendations (3-5 years):

5. Targeted investment in communication infrastructure: Develop high-speed internet networks in all villages with tourism potential and improve access roads to tourism sites (such as Rudkhan Castle, Masouleh, and the wetland).

6. Digital empowerment of women: Hold specialized courses in online sales, product photography, content marketing, and using e-commerce platforms (such as Digikala, Basalam, and Instagram) for women entrepreneurs.

7. Creating women's cooperation networks and cooperatives: With the support of the Cultural Heritage Organization and Agricultural Jihad, establish production and sales cooperatives for handicrafts and food products so women can manage marketing, raw material supply, and product sales collectively.

8. Promotional and awareness programs: With the cooperation of IRIB and local media, produce documentary and dialogue-based programs about the successes of rural women entrepreneurs to gradually change the attitudes of society and families toward women's work.

Long-term recommendations (5-10 years):

9. Integrating entrepreneurship education into the rural education system: From elementary and secondary levels, incorporate skills and entrepreneurship courses (with emphasis on tourism, handicrafts, and organic farming) into the curriculum of rural schools.

10. Establishing rural tourism innovation and acceleration centers: With the cooperation of universities and the private sector, establish centers to support women's innovative ideas in tourism and help them develop businesses and attract investment.

11. Strengthening local governance and women's participation: Increase the share of women in village councils, village headmen positions, and local tourism committees so they can play a direct role in tourism development decisions.

12. Continuous and systematic ecosystem evaluation: Design a monitoring and evaluation system for annually tracking changes in ecosystem components and the effectiveness of intervention programs, with the participation of women entrepreneurs themselves.

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Authors' Contribution

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Conflict of Interest

Authors declared no conflict of interest.

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