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On the gender imperative in tourism geographies research

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ABSTRACT

This discussion provides a critical review of gender issues in tourism geographies. It maps historical and contemporary developments and provides a future research agenda that suggests moving beyond binary and Western gender discourses.

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Introduction

The tourism experience is profoundly embodied and gendered. Travel involves the gendered bodies being transported to and moving through different places, with the exceptions of virtual tourism and vicarious tourism (i.e., travel through movies and music)—even these experiences without corporeal mobility are highly gendered, too (Connell & Gibson, 2004). In the tourism space, how gendered tourist bodies interact with places and people (including workers, hosts, researchers, and other tourists) is subject to social scripts, including the gender script.

Gender is widely defined as a system of beliefs and practices to differentiate between men and women and to perpetuate such differentiation. However, the meaning of gender is contested and has evolved. Gender is increasingly conceptualised as a spectrum, recognising the corporeality, embodiment, complexity, and fluidity in one's biological sex, sexuality, gender expression, and gender identity (Eger et al., 2022). Gender shapes every aspect of humanity, including tourism processes and practices, from construction, production to consumption. Tourism space has historically privileged the experience of men, especially those who are white and heterosexual (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000). Gender inequity permeates many aspects of tourism, evidenced by the geography of women's fear where the mobility of female tourists is restricted (Wilson & Little, 2008), gender-based violence against tourists, workers, and tourism researchers (Schänzel & Porter, 2023; Vizcaino-Suárez et al., 2020), and the disproportionate impact of the pandemic, climate change, and the fourth industrial

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revolution on women in tourism, especially in the Global South. As Figureueroa-Domecq et al. (2015) noted, 'Nowhere is gender inequity more apparent than in the tourism industry and gendered power relations permeate all tourism worlds' (p. 100).

The extent to which gender is addressed indicates epistemological maturity for a field of study (Figureueroa-Domecq et al., 2015). Several comprehensive reviews have examined the status of tourism gender studies. All pointed to the marginalisation of gender studies within the broader tourism scholarship. However, there has been increased traction on tourism gender studies in the past few years, propelled by three main forces: the formal recognition of gender equality in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG), the #metoo movement, and the COVID-19 pandemic. A scoping search on Scopus revealed two peaks for tourism gender studies in 2017 and 2020, respectively, which calls for an updated review of this maturing subfield.

This forward-looking review aims to provide an overview of the state of knowledge about gender issues in tourism, capturing key historical and recent developments of this body of literature and identifying issues on the verge of future research. This brief review is not intended to be exhaustive or systematic. Instead, it takes a tourism geography lens by focusing on what has been studied at the interface of gender and tourism geographies and from whose perspective. The review distinguishes itself from other critical reviews by approaching gender beyond women. We pay specific attention to research (or the lack thereof) on men/masculinities, non-binary, LGBTIQA+, and the intersection of gender and other identities.

A history of gender research in tourism

This section briefly overviews critical developments in the subfield of tourism gender studies from the 1970s to 2023, broadly organised into three phases: incubation, crystallisation, and diversification.

1970s–1999 incubation: from add women and stir to gender aware

Smith's (1979) 'Women the Taste-makers in Tourism' in *Annals of Tourism Research* marked one of the first publications that paid attention to women in tourism. Early tourism gender studies predominantly focused on employment, tourism development, and sex/romance tourism, mostly ceased at 'adding women and stir' or identifying descriptive differences without critiquing underlying gender and power structures. In response to the nascent focus on gender in tourism scholarship, two landmark works emerged in the mid-90s, including Kinnaird and Hall (1994) edited book, '*Tourism: A Gender Analysis*' and the first special issue on Gender in Tourism edited by Swain (1995) for *Annals of Tourism Research*, which called for a gender-aware framework and greater engagement with feminist scholarship in theorising gender issues in tourism.

2000–2009 Crystallisation: critical turn to gender in tourism

This era marked the 'Critical turn' of tourism studies, which seeks to critique dominant discourses and unveil the nature of power, discourses, and representations in tourism, and gender issues were foregrounded in this movement. The seminal work of Pritchard

and Morgan (2000), 'Constructing Tourism Landscapes - Gender, Sexuality and Space' marked the first gender-focused publication in *Tourism Geographies*. The study problematised the gendered representation of destinations. It expounded how tourism space and places are socio-cultural constructions, of which tourism processes and practices are gendered and privileged the experience of male tourists, especially those who are white and heterosexual. Pritchard, Morgan, Ateljevic, and Harris established the *Critical Tourism Studies* network in 2005, followed by their edited book in 2007.

Concomitantly, thought leaders from the incubation phase continued to publish several important works, including Kinnaird and Hall's (2000) article, 'Theorizing Gender in Tourism Research' in *Tourism Recreation Research*, and later Hall, Swain and Kinnaird joined force and edited a special issue in 2003 for the same journal to chart an evolving agenda of gender studies in tourism.

This crystallisation phase saw the convergence of thinking in defining gender scholarship in tourism while enriching the theoretical foundations for gender studies in tourism. The emergence of critical tourism scholarship challenged the hegemonic masculine discourse in setting tourism research agenda and ways of doing research. More research focused on the dynamic and complex power relations that shape the gender experience in tourism. Studies on LGBTIQ+ and masculinities are also emerging. Some early works published in *Tourism Geographies* include Visser's (2003) study investigating a gay enclave in Africa and Malam's (2004) work on the fluid gender identities performed by Thai male workers.

2010–2023 Diversification: pluralistic approach to tourism gender studies

To map this expanding subfield, Figureueroa-Domecq et al. (2015) offered a gender-aware bibliometric analysis covering publications during 1985–2012. Despite the growing momentum, this landmark review found that tourism gender studies remain relatively marginalised in the number of publications and citations compared to other tourism subfields. Four focus areas were identified: gendered tourists, gendered hosts, gendered labour, theory, research, and education. Nonetheless, there was a skewed focus on women and lack of engagement with queer theory, post-colonial feminism, transgender politics, and cyber-feminism. The gender subfield resembled the broader tourism scholarship and was highly Anglo-centric, with few publications in the Global South. Figureueroa-Domecq et al. (2015) concluded that the ignition of tourism gender studies requires deepened engagement with feminist/gender-aware epistemologies, gender mainstreaming in the tourism field, and more gender research leaders, networks, and international collaboration, especially in increasing gender research capacity in less developed countries, or else the subfield could risk being stagnant. Following this, Chambers et al. (2017) edited a critically important collection to investigate the gendered nature of the tourism academy, particularly the role of gender in shaping tourism knowledge production and dissemination. Nevertheless, Xu's (2018) commentary for the 20th anniversary volume of *Tourism Geographies* continued to observe the underdevelopment of gender research in tourism geographies, heavy focus on women, and concentration of research in the Western context.

In the past few years, tourism gender scholarship seems to have taken off and become more pluralistic, catalysed by digital activism raising awareness of gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights, the rise of the Global South, and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on our observation, there have been increased publications on tourism and gender issues in the Global South by local scholars. We also see more studies engaging with feminist theories and methodologies, including postcolonial and decolonial feminism and intersectionality. These trends are reflected in *Tourism Geographies*—of the six gender publications in 2022, two were about Mexican women, two were on black travel, and one employed decolonial feminist theory. Previously silenced areas within tourism gender scholarship, including research on masculinities, LGBTIQ+, and transgender, are slowly and unevenly germinating. Some examples include Porter et al. (2021) book exploring masculinities in tourism field research and Reddy-Best and Olson (2020) work on trans travelling. It is important to note that while these areas are gaining traction, their presence is a drop of water on a hot stone compared to the staggering growth of non-gender-aware tourism publications produced in recent years.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light pervasive gender inequalities, with the health and economic crisis impacting women disproportionately in many aspects of their lives. The gender impact is especially pronounced in tourism, an industry with a female-dominated workforce. We conducted a scoping search on Scopus and noted a significant leap in tourism gender studies in 2020, a trend that continues to climb in 2023. There has been a strong call for gender-inclusive recovery for a sustainable tourism future at both international and national levels. Eger et al. (2022) special issue on gender and tourism sustainability was a timely contribution to advance this agenda. Recognising the integral role of gender equality in achieving a sustainable future and the underserved potential of feminist thinking, such as feminist ethics of care in transforming human and nature relations, gender and sustainability have emerged as important research areas in tourism geographies. The pandemic has also renewed our aspirations and needs for travel and further catalysed the blurred boundaries between travel, work, and life, bringing a new light to gendered mobility. As we transition into the 'Asian Century' (Sin et al., 2021), there has been a growing presence of tourism gender studies on Asian subjects by Asian scholars, further pluralising the subfield.

Current trends of gender issues in tourism geographies

Gender and sustainability

The UNSDG has solidified the importance of gender equality, with myriad tourism studies and industry reports frequently citing goal #5. Within the gender and sustainable tourism discourse, a burgeoning body of work has emerged, predominantly focusing on women's empowerment in tourism. Nonetheless, little progress has been made to mainstream gender in sustainable tourism development, alluding to patriarchal capitalism and anthropocentrism that dominate the sustainability agenda (Eger et al., 2022). Tourism geographers are interested in human-nature relations, but this relationship is marked by tension and division at this juncture in history through

unprecedented human exploitation of the environment. The domination of nature resembles the subjugation of women. For instance, nature is often gendered and sexualised through descriptors such as bountiful mother and virgin land awaiting masculine exploration or exploitation (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000). When human-nature relation becomes unsustainable, manifesting in ecological and environmental disasters, women, especially those in resource-poor countries in the Global South, often bear the heaviest brunt due to social reproduction of labour division. Past studies demonstrated this, including the nexus of tourism, gender and water justice, and gender and climate change. As Alarcón and Cole (2019) impactfully captured, there is 'no sustainability for tourism without gender equality' (p. 903).

Sustainable development hinges on human flourishing (Eger et al., 2022), and humanity is not flourishing without gender equality. The institutionalisation of sustainable development too often prioritises universal solutions that are instrumentalist, quantifiable and gender-neutral. Tucker's (2022) work has shown how sustainability can be elusive and contradictory if gender is not considered. Gender theorising offers alternative frameworks to challenge assumptions about human-nature relations and could inspire systemic transformation to achieve social and eco-cultural justice. Ecofeminism elucidates the parallel between the domination of women and the degradation of the environment. It advocates for feminist ethics of care and cooperation in human-nature interactions (Eger et al., 2022), as opposed to domination and aggression—which are characterised as hegemonic masculine traits. However, the possibility of building a gender-transformative and ecologically sustainable society lies in how we engage men as critical change agents. Recognising the apparent dearth of research on men and climate change, Ahmed and Dery (2022) called for more holistic and grounded conceptualisations of the nexus of masculinities and sustainability, seeing the construction and enactment of masculinity not just as the cause but as an opportunity for change.

Gendered mobilities

The mobilities turn has seen a growing corpus of tourist mobility research in the past decade. Mobility in tourism geographies predominantly concerns how tourists move through tourism spaces and places. The tourist movement, however, is highly embodied and gendered, with women having restricted access to specific urban spaces and destinations. Transgression into these spaces could expose female travellers to risks ranging from unwanted attention to physical violence, manifesting the geographies of women's fear (Wilson & Little, 2008).

Recognising gendered mobility, women's travel experience has received the most attention within the tourism gender scholarship, investigating numerous topics, including motivation, behaviour, experience, constraint, and risk. In particular, solo female travel has emerged as a prominent social phenomenon and research topic that has taken off in the past decade. The interest in solo female travel is predicted to sustain post-COVID (Alonso-Vazquez et al., 2023). This trend will continue to be an essential area of research, as solo travel offers a microcosm of gender and other social inequalities in women's travel, where risks are heightened when women are alone in an unfamiliar space. At the same time, by resisting and negotiating the gendered social

scripts through solo travel, women experience empowerment and transformation (Yang et al., 2018). Recent research has broadened the investigation of solo female travel to diverse cultures, including women from conservative societies previously seen as 'immobile' and Asia.

Relatedly, gender-based violence is prevalent in tourism, affecting workers, travellers, and researchers. This area of research has gained momentum in recent years, catalyzed by the fourth feminist wave through digital activism such as the #metoo movement. Vizcaino-Suárez et al. (2020) groundbreaking collection of multidisciplinary works throws a critical interrogative light on the disconcerting prevalence of violence against women in tourism, part of broader social structures of power and inequalities. Spawning from the need to ameliorate gendered risk and violence, women on tours emerged as a nascent subtheme, reflecting the growing demand for women-only tours and tours by female guides to carve a safe space for women, especially in high-risk destinations and cultures with conservative gender beliefs. Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognise that female tourists are not always oppressed. The dominance of women in voluntourism is one example of contemporary neo-colonial processes that deviate from historic masculine colonialism (Bandyopadhyay & Patil, 2017). This example highlights the need for more pluralistic investigations to unravel the intersectional complexities of gender in tourism.

While existing studies have made essential knowledge contributions to women's travel motivation, behaviour, and experience, there remains work to broaden and deepen the theoretical understanding of gendered mobility. A central critique of the gendered tourist literature lies in its heavy focus on women's experience, with little research examining men's travel experience theorising through a gender lens. While gender difference has been frequently examined in tourist studies, it was often used as a symbolic inclusion for descriptive comparison without any engagement with feminist or gender theories. Feminist geographies offer a promising avenue to advance theorisation on gender and socio-spatial interactions within tourism.

Tourism gender studies in the Asian Century

The Asian turn post-pandemic offers an excellent opportunity to address Anglo-Western tourism knowledge production centrism and create a more inclusive tourism scholarship (Sin et al., 2021). The transition is reflected in the growing prominence of Asian scholarship in tourism. Although at a much smaller scale, there has been an increasing presence of tourism gender studies by Asian scholars on Asian subjects in the past few years, which contrasts earlier reviews on the persistent dearth of non-Western perspectives (Figureueroa-Domecq et al., 2015; Xu, 2018).

Cultural values shape gender norms and relations, solidified through shared historical, social, religious, and political events unique to a specific geographical context. While the conceptualisation of Asian genders may assume an oversimplified and essentialised view that overlooks the pluralistic gender norms in the region, strategic essentialism is instrumental in carving space for marginalised voices.

The edited book by Khoo-Lattimore and Mura (2016) shines an essential light on Asian genders in tourism, an area previously overlooked. The book took a reflexive Asian-centric approach to the cultural nuances of Asian gendered identities and how

that affects tourism knowledge production, fieldwork, and embodied performances in physical and virtual tourism space. Within this fledgling stream of research, Asian female travel has gained noticeable momentum since the mid-2010s, such as solo female travel and girlfriend getaways. A handful of studies were dedicated to Asian gay travellers, including Asian gay researchers (Porter et al., 2021) and trans and gender-fluid workers (Malam, 2004). A significant knowledge gap remains about Asian masculinities in tourism. There is a need to further theorise the connection between geopolitics and body-politics (including the embodied politics of gender, sexuality, race) in tourism through a postcolonial and decolonial lens.

Gaps in the literature and future research directions

Women's place in adventure tourism

Engagements in adventure tourism have been growing but are continually portrayed through their reflection of heteronormative masculinity. This happens despite women making up about half of the adventure travellers and research on women's experiences with adventure and outdoor activities gaining traction. The narrow representation of adventure experiences has stereotyped adventure tourism with male stories dominating outdoor geographies. This dominance has marginalised women's participation and research opportunities in adventure travel. However, women should not be perceived as a homogenous segment in that adventure travel and engagements with adventure geographies allow them to display flexibility in their gendered identities (Clarke et al., 2022). With the increased participation of women in adventure activities come pregnancies, often challenging the social expectations that dictate avoiding risks or strenuous physical exercise when pregnant. There is evidence that pregnant women use the liminal spaces of adventure tourism for transformation or even transgression, allowing them to break away from the normative experience of being pregnant (Díaz-Carrión et al., 2020). The discourse of adventure activities, especially extreme adventure, is highly gendered, making it culturally unacceptable for (maternal) women to be involved in dangerous pursuits, resulting in limitations on their behaviour (Palmer, 2004).

The judgment passed on women adventurers with child(ren) far surpasses that of male adventurers who happen to be fathers; such is the highly gendered morality of risk-taking. When Alison Hargreaves, a mother of two, was killed descending from Mt Everest in 1998, the media persecuted her for effectively abandoning her children by taking such extraordinary risks (Palmer, 2004). The hypermasculine representation of risk-taking continues at adventure film festivals, with children or fathering roles remaining peripheral (Frohlick, 2005). It is then encouraging to see the proliferation of adventure film tours for women in recent years, such as Gutsy Girls since 2017 (gutsygirlsadventurefilmtour.com.au) and No Man's Land Film Festival since 2015 (nomanslandfilmfestival.org), aiming to promote and un-define what it means to be feminine in adventure through film. Despite these encouraging developments, the geography of risk can still be considered one-sided, to the extent that a heteronormative (often white) male discourse prevails with a more nuanced scholarship of gender, including adventurous femininities and paternal masculinities largely absent.

Neo-nomadism and gender

The pandemic has accelerated lifestyle mobilities and neo-nomadism with the normalisation of remote working, enabled by neoliberal economic models and digital technologies. Tourism and everyday geographies meet in these blurred work, life, and travel boundaries. The extraordinary space of tourism that promises a supposedly temporary suspension of day-to-day constraints and performances becomes mundane and is being stripped of its alterity, while the mundane becomes extraordinary. One distinct example is the rise of the digital nomad lifestyle. The digital nomad concept was first introduced in 1997 and recognised as a social phenomenon in the mid-2010s. However, the pandemic has catalysed the popularity of digital nomadism (Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021). Tourism destinations, especially those in the Global South with a lower cost of living, are proactively targeting this growing market post-pandemic. The significance of this phenomenon has attracted scholarly attention in tourism and mobility fields, including Holleran and Notting (2023) article on mobility guilt and justice of digital nomads.

Hypermobility in a neo-nomadic lifestyle enables fluid and transitional subjectivities, which impacts the construction of self and gender identity. Nonetheless, how gender identity and performance traverse these intersecting spheres remains largely unknown. Mancinelli (2020) observed traditional gender roles and labour division in digital nomad families and how this lifestyle can affect the decision to start a family. The nomadic lifestyle has seen most digital nomads traveling solo, and being solo on the road as a woman or queer person could bring liberation, risk, and transformation. Furthermore, the geographies of digital nomadism reveal social and racial inequalities between the Global North and South, with metropolitan elites from affluent and predominantly Western countries living their dreams in peripheral locations. The embodied and gendered interactions between the privileged digital nomads and local people warrant further investigation.

Non-Binary perspectives

Binary gender norms largely dictate society, and any variations can affect how tourist geographies are experienced. There is a changing gender discourse in tourism, which entails more fluid gender norms and perceptions of gender categories and how these impact gender issues in tourism. Despite a broadening of gender debates towards the LGBTQI+ communities, gay men and Western discourses prevail. Recent research by Prayag et al. (2023) highlights how lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people experience discrimination when travelling because of their minoritised status. Nevertheless, travel can also play a unique role in their lives by providing an opportunity to escape the constrictors of how one is defined and positioned in their home environment. There is increasing research disseminating the gay tourism phenomenon, which usually subsumes not only lesbian but also all other sexual orientations or gender identities under the 'gay' rather than queer umbrella term (e.g., Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2021). The use of gay, however, is contested by transgender scholars from the Global South, who state that researchers have widely ignored trans people and mistakenly included them under the same umbrella as LSB tourism (Monterrubio et al., 2022). These authors state that despite the potential benefits travel and tourism can offer transgender men and women, their experiences as gender dissident individuals are often subject to stigma, discrimination, and violence, which differ from LGB travellers.

Debates about 'third' and non-binary genders in tourism are absent, yet historical antecedents exist for gender fluidity and mobility. Native Americans, depending on the tribes, recognised three to five genders; the gender view was often simplistically translated in English as having 'two spirits' (Brayboy, 2018). Two-spirits people were allowed to move between genders without restrictions and were highly revered. Fa'afāfine are Samoan males who enact varying degrees and types of feminine behaviour. According to Schmidt (2018), how fa'afāfine are understood as gendered is a complex and sometimes contradictory intersection of 'males,' 'men,' 'not-men,' 'not-women,' and 'like women.' However, rather than being a 'third gender,' fa'afāfine sit across the binary by embodying masculinity and femininity. Places like Thailand and India also have more gender-fluid societal norms. Thus, further research into discourses of transgender, 'third gender,' and genderqueer, especially from indigenous cultures and the Global South, can serve as a model for a broadened gender scholarship in tourism geographies challenging some of the dominant Western and binary gender narratives.

Conclusions

This commentary set out to foster the foundation of tourism gender studies through a narrative appraisal of this subfield's historical and current development and to cultivate a research agenda for tourism geographies moving forward. It becomes evident that previously marginalised areas within tourism gender research are germinating, but also that feminist researchers need to extend their insights beyond discourses of femininity. What emerges is that existing conceptualisations based on binary and Western discourses overlook the complexity of gender and restrict the progress of gender enquiry within tourism geographies. Contemporary gender scholarship continuously evolves, highlighting that masculine and feminine traits can co-exist within an individual and that no one should be restricted by their gender identity. This evolution means abandoning binary thinking and focusing on plurality, fluidity, and hybridism in a post-feminist environment (Porter et al., 2021). However, the hegemonic and heteronormative (white) male discourse prevails when more nuanced understandings of (paternal) masculinities are desperately needed. At the same time, queer scholarship is dominated mainly by gay males when much can be gained from more broadened gender frameworks with historical antecedents in indigenous cultures and the Global South. This evolving gender discourse must include intersectional research to unravel the interplay of gender and other social identities in the more equitable understanding of tourism geographies. There is no doubt that gender issues in tourism (still) matter and that gender equality is critical to more sustainable and regenerative geographies in tourism. Deepening the theorisation of gender in human-nature relations is vital for tourism geographers moving forward. For gender scholarship, this means moving beyond a binary gender discourse, embracing femininities and masculinities in tourism in all its representations, and tackling the deep issues we face by working together towards a more inclusive humanity.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Elaine Chiao Ling Yang is a Senior Lecturer in Tourism at Griffith University. Elaine's work focuses on the empowerment of marginalised groups in tourism, including women, children, and migrants, as travellers, entrepreneurs, and workers. Most of her work entails an intersectionality lens that foregrounds the intertwined gender, race, and cultural identities. She also specialises in solo travel, Asian tourism, and visual research methods. Elaine is an associate editor of *Frontiers in Sustainable Tourism (Social Impact of Tourism)* and an editorial board member of *Tourism Management Perspectives*. Elaine has received multiple research awards, including the CAUTHE Fellows Award in 2023.

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