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Circular-based economy and female entrepreneurship in rural tourism communities: a research agenda

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Abstract

This study addresses the critical intersection of female entrepreneurship and the circular economy within rural communities, a topic that has received limited systematic attention in academic literature. Rural areas often present unique socioeconomic and demographic challenges, including limited social and economic interaction, which can hinder the growth and sustainability of businesses, particularly those led by women. While existing research has explored the broader relationship between entrepreneurship and sustainability, a significant gap remains in studies that specifically systematize the convergence of the circular economy and female entrepreneurship. To bridge this gap, a comprehensive theoretical review was conducted, drawing exclusively from a corpus of scientific articles on the subject. The results show three important findings. First, the principles of the circular economy—such as reducing, reusing, and recycling resources—are highly compatible with the tourism sector, especially in rural settings where sustainable practices can create unique value propositions. Second, the review identified several benefits and best practices of a circular tourism economy, highlighting how these models can enhance resource efficiency and foster local economic resilience. Finally, the study outlined the significant challenges that female entrepreneurs face in adopting these models, including access to capital, networks, and specialized knowledge. Building on these insights, this research also proposes a set of strategic

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recommendations, aimed at not only to offer new opportunities for female entrepreneurs in rural areas but also to contribute directly to the objectives outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly those focused on gender equality and responsible consumption and production.

Keywords: circular economy; female; entrepreneurship; tourism; innovation.

Economía circular y emprendimiento femenino en comunidades rurales turísticas: una agenda de investigación

Resumen

Este estudio aborda la intersección crítica entre el emprendimiento femenino y la economía circular en las comunidades rurales, un tema que ha recibido poca atención sistemática en la literatura académica. Las zonas rurales suelen presentar retos socioeconómicos y demográficos únicos, entre ellos una interacción social y económica limitada, lo que puede obstaculizar el crecimiento y la sostenibilidad de las empresas, en particular las dirigidas por mujeres. Si bien las investigaciones existentes han explorado la relación más amplia entre el emprendimiento y la sostenibilidad, sigue existiendo una brecha significativa en los estudios que sistematizan específicamente la convergencia de la economía circular y el emprendimiento femenino. Para colmar esta laguna, se llevó a cabo una revisión teórica exhaustiva, basándose exclusivamente en un corpus de artículos científicos sobre el tema. Los resultados muestran tres conclusiones importantes. En primer lugar, los principios de la economía circular —como la reducción, la reutilización y el reciclaje de recursos— son muy compatibles con el sector turístico, especialmente en entornos rurales, donde las prácticas sostenibles pueden crear propuestas de valor únicas. En segundo lugar, la revisión identificó varios beneficios y mejores prácticas de una economía turística circular, destacando cómo estos modelos pueden mejorar la eficiencia de los recursos y fomentar la resiliencia económica local. Por último, el estudio describió los importantes retos a los que se enfrentan las mujeres empresarias a la hora de adoptar estos modelos, entre ellos el acceso al capital, las redes y los conocimientos especializados. A partir de estas conclusiones, la investigación también propone una serie de recomendaciones estratégicas, destinadas no solo a ofrecer nuevas oportunidades a las mujeres empresarias de las zonas rurales, sino también a contribuir directamente a los objetivos establecidos en la Agenda 2030 para el Desarrollo Sostenible, en particular los centrados en la igualdad de género y el consumo y la producción responsables.

Palabras clave: economía circular; mujer; emprendimiento; turismo; innovación.

1. Introduction

Globally, the tourism sector plays a crucial role in the economic growth and development of countries (Chen & Liu, 2025; Mora et al., 2025). It is a significant source of employment, particularly for women (Gabor et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2021). However, tourism also has negative impacts on both society and the environment. These include environmental degradation, waste generation, food waste, high water and energy consumption, loss of traditional knowledge, population displacement, and local community disintegration (Rodríguez et al., 2020).

These challenges highlight the need for stakeholders in the tourism sector to design innovative strategies that foster positive social, economic, and environmental impacts within tourist communities. Such strategies should begin with the management of enterprises, social urbanization, empowerment, and organizational development. This can be achieved through the application of participatory methodologies that transform spaces and consolidate collective processes, moving from community autonomy to direct action. This approach ensures that all participants in the tourism industry are engaged in building a more sustainable and equitable sector.

Uncontrolled and unplanned tourism growth has a direct and detrimental impact on social and environmental contexts. In response, new paradigms have emerged to challenge the traditional model of mass production and consumption. One notable example is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which aligns various objectives to foster a more sustainable future.

Among its key goals, SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) emphasizes the importance of “fostering inclusive and sustainable growth, employment and decent job for everyone” (Moran, n.d.). A specific target under this goal is to “enhance policies oriented to the development of supporting productive activities, creating decent jobs, empowerment, creativity, and innovation. As a result, it promotes legalization and the growth of microenterprises, and the small and medium microenterprises, even with access to financial services.”

Furthermore, the 2030 Agenda's holistic approach is complemented by other SDGs. SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) focuses on urban and communal sustainability, while SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) advocates for new economic and environmental theories such as the circular economy (CE), social economy, and resilience theory. When applied to tourism, these theories offer comprehensive solutions for sustainability.

Tourism is a complex activity that requires integrated solutions rather than isolated initiatives. This is where the practices of the circular economy and innovation can provide impactful solutions for the sustainable development of rural communities. These approaches operate under the core principles of collaboration, solidarity, and environmental care, with a particular focus on empowering women (Aquino & Boluk, 2025; Aydoğan & Güney, 2025; Khizar et al., 2023; Lucchi et al., 2024; United Nations Women, 2024)

Current research provides little insight into the dynamics between the circular economy (CE) and female entrepreneurship in rural communities.

To address this gap, our primary objective is to highlight an inclusive framework for the circular economy that integrates traditional ecological knowledge, facilitates resource efficiency, and minimizes waste in rural tourism communities. This framework seeks to create new opportunities for female entrepreneurs.

This research's most significant contribution is its focus on the intersection of CE and tourism within female-led businesses in rural areas. The study addresses two essential aspects of this problem:

1. Exploring innovative solutions to enable sustainable tourism practices.
2. Implementing CE concepts within the rural female entrepreneurship sector.

These dynamics raise crucial questions that this research aims to answer:

- What is the relationship between tourism and the circular economy?
- What are the potential benefits of the circular economy for the tourism sector?
- What challenges do female entrepreneurs in the tourism sector face when implementing CE practices?

This document is organized into four main sections. Section one provides

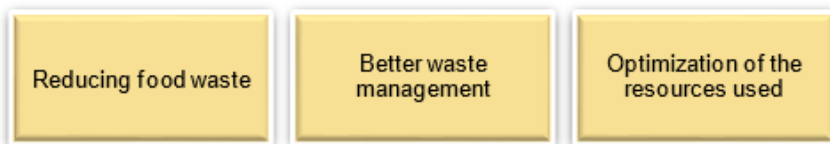
an overview of the circular economy (CE) in rural areas and its relationship with tourism, while section two outlines the methodology used for the theoretical analysis. The third section presents the results that address the core research questions., and the fourth concludes by proposing strategies and analyses for incorporating CE into rural and tourism policies

2. Overview of the circular economy in rural communities

The “vision for rural areas towards 2040” of the European Commission claims that “rural zones have an essential aspect to play in bioeconomics and circular sustainable economy” (Bote Alonso & Montalbán Pozas, 2024; *European Union*, n.d.). The theory of CE suggests leading to entrepreneurship practices towards processes of production and responsible consumption (Sørensen & Bærenholdt, 2020).

Inspired by nature's closed-loop systems, the circular economy (CE) aims for sustainable development by perpetually recycling materials and eliminating waste (Cirtoinno, n.d.). As a result, CE provides valuable tools for improving collaborative sustainability decisions in rural communities, which ensures the benefits shown in diagram 1.

Diagram 1
Benefits of the circular economy for rural communities



Source: Adapted from Carlisle et al. (2023).

The prevention and diversion of waste via reuse, repair, refurbishment, remanufacturing, repurposing, recycling, and composting are fundamental to a circular economy and are essential for mitigating the environmental impact of solid waste. Therefore, it is critical to analyze the drivers and tendencies of the tourism sector and its impacts on resources, the environment, and health throughout the entire value chain. This principle holds particular significance for rural and indigenous communities, where it can enhance resource conservation and bolster local economies through repair and sustainable craftsmanship

3. Methodology

The methodology used aims to propose an inclusive framework

of CE. This framework will integrate the traditional ecological knowledge, promotes the efficiency of resources, and reduces waste in rural tourism communities. All of this to offer opportunities to female entrepreneurs. To reach this goal a set of three phases, as a research design, was implemented. These phases are:

- Identification of data set: implied a selection of *the Scopus* database, known for its coverage of academic journals, checked by pairs as part of their core research. Only studies published in peer-reviewed academic journals were included.
- Application of criteria for articles selection: different inclusion/exclusion criteria were employed for the articles chosen (chart 1).

Chart 1
Inclusion / Exclusion criteria

Parameters	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Article language	Studies in English	Studies in a language other than English
Publication date	Papers published between 2015 and 2025	Papers published before 2015
Topic	Articles related to the topic Circular economy and female entrepreneurship in rural tourism communities	Articles with topics or areas of knowledge other than tourism
Types of studies	Articles published in indexed journals	Book chapters, conferences, books, non-refereed journals, papers

- Data analysis: It involved an exhaustive selection and evaluation of eligibility. The final data set contained 61 scientific articles published in English, between 2015 and 2025.

4. Circular economy and female entrepreneurship: main results

Below are the key findings of this study, which addresses female

entrepreneurship and the circular economy.

4.1. Interconnection between tourism and the circular economy

Many countries globally have shown excellent potential for embracing the circular economy (CE). For example, Slovenia, Spain, and Austria have allocated roughly 80% of their European

Union Structural Funds to key areas like research, development, and innovation (R&D&I), competitiveness, information and communication technologies (ICT), and a low-carbon society. These countries also prioritize vital initiatives for tourism, including:

- Adapting to climate change
- Improving the environment and biodiversity
- Developing infrastructure for sustainable mobility
- Enhancing social inclusion and institutional capacity

Tourism development in rural communities has often had a negative impact on natural resources, including land and water. This trend is closely tied to rural gentrification, as the growth of tourism can lead to a rise in property values and the displacement of local residents (Ma et al., 2025; Sheppard & Pemberton, 2023).

Furthermore, small-scale tourism providers often struggle with the complex decisions needed for sustainability, especially in fragile environments (Bertella, 2023). They are frequently disconnected from the main tourist market, lack entrepreneurship training, and have few incentives to collaborate with other local participants. These challenges, combined with over-tourism, seasonality, and limited local capacity, make it difficult for communities to participate in and benefit from the tourism industry (Aquino & Boluk, 2025).

For tourism to effectively embrace the circular economy (CE), two key conditions must be met:

1. Local communities must have the capacity to manage the resources used for tourism activities.
2. Mechanisms for collaborative management must be in place (Gascón & Cañada, 2025).

The tourism sector is often viewed as a valuable strategy for regenerating and developing remote territories. It achieves this by preserving cultural heritage and conserving the environment while also providing a complementary income stream to traditional agricultural activities (Ribeiro et al., 2021).

The CE approach seeks to empower vulnerable communities by promoting responsible and community-based tourism that complements traditional economic activities, allowing them to actively participate in the local economy by generating additional income and proper resource management. This type of initiative not only addresses waste management in tourism businesses, but also empowers women entrepreneurs by offering them the opportunity to participate in the family economy, improving their income and quality of life (Bonfanti et al., 2024; Giampiccoli, 2020; McCall & Mearns, 2021; Portuguese-Castro & Ramírez-Montoya, 2025).

Synchronizing these practices aligns with the global CE goals of the 2030 Agenda, while respecting indigenous self-sufficiency and sustainability principles. Raising awareness of these goals and practices can foster women's empowerment through decision-making, take advantage of these measures and, benefit the sector's value chain (Roy et al., 2023).

4.2. Benefits and good practices of the circular economy for tourism

This research links the global concern for sustainable management with the tourism industry. It proposes innovative practices that contribute to better resource management and

highlights the significant benefits of applying circular economy (CE) principles to the tourism sector. These benefits, which apply to destinations, tourists, and businesses alike, are outlined in Chart 2 below.

Chart 2
Benefits of the circular economy for tourism

Benefit / author	Description
Capture tourists or consumers who have a greater awareness of environmental care (Chen & Liu, 2025; Henao-Hincapié et al., 2024; Suhardono et al., 2025). Optimize resources (Kolade et al., 2024; Moran, n. d.).	Offer information about the benefits of CE practices for tourism.
Cost savings (Strippoli et al., 2024)	To guide the sustainable management of biological materials, which is fundamental for CE.
Improve the capacity to innovate (Mirkova & Padrón-Fumero, 2025).	Employ traditional practices and materials to ensure the provision of responsible and sustainable tourism services.
Contribute to the objectives of the 2030 Agenda (Roy et al., 2023).	CE facilitates the creation of local systems for sharing tools and resources, reduces the need for external inputs, and minimizes waste by misusing local resources.
Improve business and destination competitiveness (Gabor et al., 2023; Licastro & Sergi, 2021).	Remote communities should incorporate renewable energy sources as a critical component of CE. CE reduces the need for transportation and related carbon emissions, making it an economically and environmentally beneficial model.
Provide new opportunities for job creation in remote rural areas (Aydoğan & Güney, 2025; Khizar et al., 2023; Mathieu, 2024; Perpiña Castillo et al., 2024).	Natural landscapes and ecosystems, as well as tourism, provide new employment opportunities for the community.
Foster sustainable and responsible tourism for efficient management of cultural resources (Grah et al., 2020; Khizar et al., 2023).	Employing traditional artisanal techniques that lead to more responsible and sustainable products.
Environmental harmony (Turner & Berkes, 2006).	Emphasizes the balance between local solutions and environmental welfare.

After incorporating principles of circular, green, solidarity, collaborative, and knowledge-based economies, women entrepreneurs can develop innovative solutions, adapted to the context and aligned with the objectives of their projects. The following examples illustrate how these frameworks have been translated into concrete strategies and actions in various countries.

There are initiatives based on CE practices and objectives as alternative business models. Some research mentions responsible consumption initiatives or the design of proper practice

manuals for the evolution to circular tourism. Experimental evidence reveals that companies in the tourism sector implement these strategies as a possible solution to mitigate the environmental externalities of their practices.

For instance, within Scandinavian lodging establishments, research was held on hoteliers' understanding of CE, its initiators, enablers, barriers, and value creation potential (Sorin & Sivarajah, 2021). The study by Merli et al. (2018) in Italy's wine regions broadened prior analyses by introducing an assessment framework for tourism stakeholders to

apply new indicators for evaluating wine producer sustainability performance.

Another study investigates how public sector dynamics, economic dependencies, and equity concerns influence stakeholder perceptions in tourism-dependent economies, providing insights for sustainable and inclusive results-oriented governance frameworks (Mirkova & Padrón-Fumero, 2025).

There is also evidence of the factors that inspire SMEs to develop CE activities, focusing specifically on the macro and meso levels to explore the role of cultural factors, entrepreneurship, and the regulatory framework in promoting CE within tourism communities (González-Moreno et al., 2024). Thus, possibilities emerge for creating holistic outcomes of female participation and CE. It can help promote collaborative stakeholder engagement, generate new perspectives for positive transformations, and establish evidence-based indicators to identify progress towards equity and female participation (Matovu et al., 2025).

The Mercantile State Society for the Management of Innovation and Tourism Technologies (SEGITTUR, 2022) has documented a series of good CE practices promoted by tourism destinations and companies in Spain. Some success stories include aspects such as electric mobility in natural areas, zero-plastic hotels, sustainable recipes, collective composting, and sustainable mobility routes.

In Mexico, the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2024) indicates that female participation in the sector is transversal, with a notable representation in temporary lodging services and food and beverage preparation companies. Therefore, it includes the support of the "Rural Pride" credit, aimed at assisting

MSMEs in communities with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants, to collaborate with their productive activities conducted in rural areas. Its purpose is to promote cultural and adventure tourism. A notable model involves lodging cooperatives, in which community members collaborate to develop and operate lodging options like cabins, rural houses, and hotels

Hostels are frequently managed by indigenous communities, allowing visitors to interact directly with their culture, traditions, and customs. Establishments are often located in remote communities, which makes the adoption of CE not only desirable but also necessary, given that they are constantly deprived of adequate waste management or potable water supply.

In summary, the studies suggest re-evaluating transition issues by prioritizing collaborative problem solving over ideological divides, to reduce polarization, focus attention on common goals, and improve perceptions of equity and inclusion by making discussions more pragmatic and solution-oriented. To effectively address the social and environmental challenges facing women in rural entrepreneurship, policymakers must develop inclusive frameworks that integrate transparent policy assessment, stakeholder collaboration, and adaptive governance.

4.3. Challenges to adopting circular economy practices among female entrepreneurs in rural communities

Rural areas face challenges with transportation infrastructure, internet access, household income, population decline, and aging (Perpiña et al., 2024). In addition, selective migration

from rural and remote areas to urban centers affects more women than men for diverse reasons and points in their life cycle, creating an unbalanced gender structure that can exacerbate existing problems (Vanella et al., 2023). Rural women face particular challenges in their lives concerning family labor, working conditions, employment, their limited participation in decision-making, informal local entrepreneurship, and access to agricultural land ownership (Fanelli, 2022; Rachele, 2022).

Female entrepreneurship in rural areas is characterized by informality. Tourism microenterprises in handicraft making are feminized both in numbers (with a disproportionately high number of women) and in the work (Trupp & Sunanta, 2017). The making and selling of handicrafts is considered women's work. For instance, in Vietnam, more than 90% of handicraft sellers and producers are women. Chart 3 lists the various challenges associated with CE, with a special focus on rural communities.

Chart 3
Challenges of circular economy practices in rural communities

Challenge / author	Description
Insufficient volume for economic viability (Recycling Programs Evolve in Rural Settings, n. d.).	In rural areas, the population density is generally low, resulting in insufficient volumes of recyclable materials to justify collection and processing costs.
Limited access to recycling infrastructure.	Remote rural communities usually lack recycling facilities, making it difficult and costly to transport recyclable materials for processing.
Lack of education and awareness about recycling	Many people are unsure which items are recyclable, leading to the inclusion of non-recyclable materials in the recycling stream, contaminating recyclable materials and damaging recycling equipment and machinery.
Loss of traditional knowledge (Gómez-Baggethun, 2022; Sokk, 2024)..	The use of technologies is rapidly replacing traditional skills and knowledge used to create, maintain, and repair traditional tools and items in remote and indigenous communities. Consequently, this change alters long-established cultural practices, economic systems, and relationships with the local environment.
Gender division of labor (Roy et al., 2023).	In indisputable communities, women are more responsible for waste management and disposal. When considering the home as an indivisible entity, it was observed that the women and men who reside there have different levels of authority and access to resources.

In general, the aforementioned challenges related to CE are more complex in remote and rural communities. They may appear unfavorable, as there are fewer job opportunities for women, less access to public services, poor physical and digital infrastructure, as well as a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion. These challenges can profoundly affect the well-being of indigenous communities with strong

spiritual and cultural ties to the land (Tehrani et al., 2025).

5. Opportunities the circular economy for women entrepreneurs

The diversification of economic activities for local development under the premises of the CE can be seen in chart 4, below.

Chart 4

Opportunities the circular economy for women entrepreneurs

Opportunity	Description
Reduction of economic dependence (Monroy et al., 2023).	One of the virtues of rural tourism is that it integrates the female population into these production chains. CE seeks to favor the family economy through the rational use of spaces that have been underutilized until now.
Promotion of community-led sustainable tourism.	It will empower women, preserve culture and nature, and ensure an equitable distribution of the benefits of tourism.
Offer authentic experiences for tourists.	At the same time, it supports local development and protects the environment through activities led by women, such as homestays, cultural tours, and consumption of traditional dishes.
Community participation is a key element of CE.	Innovative approaches, including regional cooperation, mobile recycling units, and community initiatives, are emerging to address these problems. Rural and remote communities can benefit from improving education, developing local processing capacities, and creating incentives for recycling to move towards more sustainable waste management practices and contribute to CE by improving waste management practices.
Promote the integration of the gender perspective in rural development policies.	To increase women's participation in the labor market formally, in decision-making, and local entrepreneurship, along with improved provision of social and family services such as child care. Consequently, this fosters equitable and resilient transitions.
Advocate for local cultural resources.	To make visible the fundamental role played by women entrepreneurs in the development of the process of conservation and transmission of knowledge.
Collaborative consumption (Henninger et al., 2021).	Emphasis on sharing, reusing, and exchanging.
Efficient waste management (Morais & Ishida, 2025; Roy et al., 2023).	Prevent food waste both in households and in food and beverage establishments, and establish recycling cycles, like converting food waste into resources like animal feed or fertilizer through composting. Traditional gender roles and cultural norms can influence waste management behavior, and women are often more involved in waste management than men.

In summary, developing appropriate business models for CE practices is technically and economically challenging. Traditional business models may not be suitable for achieving circular practices in women-led tourism ventures. Creating new, financially viable, and environmentally sustainable models is a complex process.

6. Conclusions

The tourism sector often approaches sustainability with a passive, isolated mindset. This research seeks to change that paradigm by arguing that a

narrow focus on development strategies and economic profitability is inadequate. Sustainable tourism cannot be achieved if it fails to create tangible benefits for the local community. Therefore, this research advocates for a cooperative approach, highlighting that socially and environmentally responsible tourism is only possible through collaboration among policymakers, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), businesses, and tourists.

Raising awareness among women entrepreneurs in tourism-oriented communities and changing the behavior of consumers visiting rural areas can

be a challenge due to limited access. However, rural communities often have stronger social ties and a stronger connection to natural resources, which can be employed to promote CE principles. The CE and sustainability skills gap may be more pronounced in rural areas, requiring targeted education and training programs. Despite these challenges, rural communities have the unique opportunity to implement CE practices, such as local food systems and renewable energy projects, which can contribute to their economic resilience and sustainability.

The results of this work reveal the importance of prioritizing social value over profit, fostering democratic participation, cooperation, and ecological responsibility through community organizations, cooperatives, and collaborative networks. Concerning waste management requires a coordinated and integrated approach involving stakeholders from various sectors, such as government, tourism businesses, tourists, and the community.

Effective regulations and policies need to be developed and implemented to support sustainable waste management practices and encourage innovation and investment in waste management technologies. The potential benefits of effective CE practices, such as environmental sustainability, health, and economic development, make it an essential component of development in rural communities.

In the analysis, it was revealed that progress toward greater competition in various aspects of infrastructure systems is needed to address the multifaceted and urgent challenges that decision-makers currently face in waste management, along with other tourism-related sectors.

The provided text describes two key limitations of a research study: keyword

choice and potential database bias. Specifically, using only terms from tourism literature may have omitted relevant articles, and the chosen database itself could have contributed to this omission. To address these limitations in future research, the study suggests including other academic documents, such as books, book chapters, theses, papers, and conference presentations.

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