

FROM CHALLENGES TO CHANGE: THE ROLE OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN HEALTH TOURISM

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Abstract: *The research examines the dynamic field of health tourism, with an emphasis on the contribution of female entrepreneurs. It highlights the convergence of wellness and medical tourism offerings within the sector and the possibilities for expansion in European and Romanian contexts. Personal achievement, market potential, and societal contributions are significant driving forces for women engaging in this field. The necessity for deliberate support and the establishment of policies sensitive to gender issues to create a welcoming and varied space for women in health tourism is acknowledged.*

Key words: *health tourism, women entrepreneurs, gender equality, wellness services, sustainability.*

1. Introduction

Healthcare tourism is a new concept that describes some forms of travelling with well-being perspectives for tourists. This type of tourism increases the number of market players behind travellers, such as government agencies, healthcare providers, and intermediaries (DeMicco and Poorani, 2023). The serious environmental challenges and the transition from traveller to healthcare traveller have created a new market where patients are customers, and hospitals and wellness providers are profitable entrepreneurs (Marmion and Hindley, 2019).

From a gender perspective, the healthcare industry is a beacon of empowerment for women. It is a vast sector, notably with a higher proportion of female employees compared to other industries. This includes not just service providers, but also producers of pharmaceuticals and medical equipment, showcasing the strides women have made in this field (Berlin et al., 2019).

Currently, women business owners are thought to be the engines of economies. To close the gender gap, numerous governments work to increase female participation in various economies. In addition to creating new jobs for themselves and others, women offer society unique solutions to management, organization, and commercial problems

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and the exploitation of entrepreneurial chances because of their unique cognitive and emotive distinctiveness (Tovmasyan, 2022).

2. Literature Review

Health tourism is an umbrella term for medical tourism, wellness tourism, and SPA tourism, defined by the interest in walking in nature, outside meditation, adapted nutrition, prevention of infections or chronic diseases, and quick and efficient treatment in the best life condition at the correct payment (UNWTO, 2018).

2.1. Exploration of health tourism

Health tourism represents an interesting subject for tourism organizations, governments, public institutions, entrepreneurs, private and public hospitals, universities, marketing organizations, and researchers. The global aim is to bond tourism with the market, customers, patients, and travellers, the treatment, and the prevention (Hofer et al., 2012).

Wellness and medical tourism are forms of health tourism that are explained by emotions, human resources, and empathy. Also, wellness or medical services are seen as international tourism products, which are explained by the origin of the customer and the place of consumption (Smith and Puczko, 2009).

The spectrum of health tourism is diverse, integrating wellness and medical components that offer various services and activities for individuals seeking health-oriented experiences.

The wellness category is multifaceted (Global Wellness Summit, 2023), featuring holistic options like leisure and meditation, spiritual pursuits including beauty treatments, yoga and meditation for mental and physical wellbeing. It also encompasses New Age lifestyle choices aimed at overall health enhancement. These wellness services extend to sport and fitness activities, thalassotherapy, and nutrition and detox programs, providing a holistic approach to personal care (Quintela et al., 2016).

On the medical side, there is an array of services, beginning with medical wellness, which offers a combination of leisure and therapeutic benefits and extends to medical therapeutic services. Rehabilitation is central to this category, offered as part of treatment and as an independent activity for those looking to invest time in their health during leisure. Medical facilities also provide a range of surgeries, including aesthetic and dental treatments, and a comprehensive suite of surgery services and procedures. Supporting these health tourism services are facilities designed to enhance the experience. Natural settings such as walking paths provide a serene backdrop, while ashrams and festivals offer structured environments for wellness pursuits (Whitlock, 2022).

SPA spaces, hotels, and centres hosting various activities are available for a more luxurious touch. Hospitals and clinics cater to medical needs, ensuring access to professional healthcare services. Integrating wellness and medical services and dedicated facilities constitutes a comprehensive health tourism model catering to various health and wellness needs (Smith and Puczko, 2009).

2.2. The landscape of health tourism in Europe and Romania

Due to inequalities in accessing healthcare, 49% of European Union (EU) citizens are willing to travel for medical care (Mainil et al., 2017) and better health and prevention measures (Directorate-General for Internal Market, 2021). Medical tourism depends on seasonality, legislation, and the waiting list for national healthcare. Wellness tourism accounts for two-thirds of the health tourism.

The most important destinations for wellness tourism are Europe's Central and Eastern regions and the Spanish and Baltic Coasts. Wellness is facilitated in the accommodation complexes in Italy, Bulgaria, France, and Germany. Some health services are more expensive in Switzerland than in Croatia. Wellness tourism is more than accommodation, transportation, food, and beverages, it is a complex tourism package of activities with the main aim of improving health conditions. High standards of life and healthcare are characteristic of Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, the most specialized countries in Europe for wellness tourism. Therefore, to suit the needs of the European tourist, it is fundamental to know their preferences and habits. Promising possibilities have been established by trends such as a more holistic view of health, a greater emphasis on diet and exercise, and the impact of online platforms on arranging wellness holidays (GWI, 2018).

The Romanian Association of Medical Tourism states that health tourism is currently a strategic goal for Romanian national authorities (Forbes, 2023). The growing number of foreign tourists visiting Romania has led to a new type of foreign visitor seeking health services: younger tourists seeking SPA and wellness, while older tourists are seeking dental and medical tourism.

A notable trend has been seen in the rise in wellness and spa tourism at the national level, characterized by an increase in internal tourism marked by the issuance of travel vouchers for both public and private sectors (Cioba, 2021). A report published by the Romanian Association of Balneology (ARB, 2019) highlights the potential for the growth of Romanian beach tourism by developing a destination branding strategy. Additionally, the HUB in Innovation and Healthcare, launched in 2022, will enable Romanian researchers to connect to international platforms supporting innovation and creativity by digitizing Romania's healthcare system to meet international standards (Neagu, 2022).

Romania is home to one-third of Europe's mineral spring reserves. Only 36 of the more than 160 locations with naturally occurring therapeutic resources, such as thermal and mineral waters, therapeutic lakes, therapeutic salt caves, therapeutic muds, and mofette, are recognized as spas or wellness resorts, with 26 of those being resorts of national significance.

Amid a significant and long-lasting phenomenon, the predominant and potential type of health tourism in Romania is the balneary tourism industry, which offers a wide range of services from wellness and spa tourism to medical tourism, and which grew extremely quickly between 2009 and 2018 in both Europe and worldwide (Turtureanu and Chitu, 2020).

Given that some travel agents may be seen as payers or facilitators, they have considerable influence in medical tourism. Because there are currently no rules in Romania regarding facilitators, travel agencies support medical tourism. At the same time, unions and retirees can incur expenses and provide services for union members and pensioners through the National Social Insurance Fund (Vasile et al., 2018).

3. Women Entrepreneurs in the Health Tourism Sector

The sectors where women predominantly establish businesses are services, trade, tourism, and sales. The preference for these sectors could be attributed to a need for more expertise and knowledge in production fields or limited resources, as these areas generally require less capital. This gravitation towards the service sector often results in female-led enterprises being smaller in terms of employee numbers and profitability (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2023).

In health tourism, women entrepreneurs are carving out significant roles, reshaping the industry with innovative offerings and leadership. However, their progress and contributions are nuanced by broader gender dynamics within the workforce. Many factors influence and drive gender disparities in the workforce, such as entrenched structural challenges, changes in socioeconomic and technological landscapes, and economic disturbances. While there has been a noticeable shift of women into paid employment and, progressively, into leadership roles, societal norms, corporate policies, legal frameworks, and care resources significantly impact educational and career choices (Marco and Katsoni, 2021).

With a gender parity score of 76.6%, Europe ranks second in achieving gender equality regarding workforce. According to the ongoing analysis of 102 countries featured in the index since 2006, the region noted a slight enhancement of 0.2 percentage points from 2021, projecting a timeline of 60 years to bridge the gender divide fully. Of 35 countries, 22 have narrowed over 80% of their gender disparity in workforce participation rates. On the other hand, Italy, Romania, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have yet to bridge more than 70% of their gender gap in this area, as highlighted in the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2022).

In 2022, a significant portion of global start-up ventures was concentrated in the wholesale/retail industry, claiming the majority interest of female (48.6%) and male (40.1%) entrepreneurs. Furthermore, women outpaced men in engagement within sectors like government, health, education, and social services, marking a notable participation rate of 17.6% compared to men's 10.9%. These figures suggest that nearly two-thirds of the female and half of the male entrepreneurial population are active in these sectors. Notably, the wholesale/retail sector emerges as the predominant arena for entrepreneurial activities worldwide for both genders, with a notably higher involvement from women (48.6% vs. 40.1%) (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2023).

In the dynamic field of tourism, women entrepreneurs are making impactful strides, spearheading innovation, and contributing to economic advancement across Europe. The UNWTO's "Global Report on Women in Tourism, Second Edition" highlights women's crucial impact in the tourism industry, suggesting its potential to foster gender

equality and empower women globally. This broad perspective holds particular significance for health tourism, indicating that focused efforts and skills enhancement can boost women's economic standing in the industry (UNWTO, 2019).

Despite the dynamic presence of women-led ventures in European health tourism, statistics indicate a gap, with women making up 29% of entrepreneurs across Europe (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2024). This discrepancy is also apparent in health tourism, where female-led innovation promises to elevate service diversity and quality. The sectors women favour, including health and social work, are pertinent to health tourism, showcasing an untapped opportunity for increased female leadership in this field (Filimonau V. et al, 2022).

Romania distinguishes itself through its health tourism contributions, driven by women entrepreneurs who capitalize on the nation's abundant natural resources and rich cultural heritage. These leaders do more than run businesses, they act as custodians of tradition, blending Romania's esteemed thermal waters and natural treatments with modern wellness and medical tourism offerings. This synthesis meets the rising demand for genuine, comprehensive health experiences and uniquely positions Romania in the European health tourism landscape (Enea, 2017).

4. Motivational Factors Driving Women Entrepreneurs in Health Tourism

Women's entry into the health tourism industry is fuelled by diverse and profound motivations that mirror the sector's multifaceted offerings. The drive stems from personal goals, market prospects, the determination to address challenges and the aim to effect social change, highlighting their dedication to the field.

Entrepreneurship within health tourism often aligns with many women's personal goals to create something that holds meaning and leaves an impact. This industry, emphasizing health, wellness and care, naturally appeals to many women's core values and their wish to contribute to societal well-being (Beqo and Gehrels, 2014). The chance to merge personal health and wellness interests with professional objectives offers a powerful motive for women to embark on entrepreneurial ventures in this arena. It transcends mere business pursuits, aiming instead to cultivate a healthier, more balanced society by prioritizing individual health (Figuroa-Domecq and Segovia-Perez, 2019).

The health tourism industry provides extensive and diverse opportunities, from traditional wellness retreats to innovative medical tourism projects. The sector's potential for innovation and engagement with current trends, like customized wellness programs, eco-conscious retreats, or tech-enabled health services, attracts women entrepreneurs. A global shift towards health and wellness and an increased demand for genuine, holistic health experiences open significant avenues for female leadership and success in this domain (Samad and Alharthi, 2022).

While the entrepreneurial journey presents numerous obstacles, the resolve to conquer these challenges strongly motivates many women. Addressing issues like financial accessibility, entering traditionally male-dominated fields, or managing the balance between business and family life offers a sense of empowerment. Stories of women who have successfully navigated these hurdles serve as inspiration, encouraging more to follow their entrepreneurial aspirations in health tourism. It underscores the

belief that these barriers are surmountable with perseverance, innovative thinking and support (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2023).

The ambition to positively impact society significantly motivates women involved in health tourism. This sector has a unique capacity to affect health outcomes, foster sustainable tourism and aid in the economic growth of communities. Driven by the vision to make a difference, whether through holistic well-being services, job creation, or promoting sustainable tourism practice, women entrepreneurs seek to add value to society. This pursuit of societal betterment and environmental sustainability lends an extra layer of satisfaction and purpose to their entrepreneurial journey (Pospisil and Zavodna, 2022).

Ultimately, the reasons behind women's involvement in health tourism span from seeking personal fulfilment and exploring market possibilities to overcoming adversity and aspiring to societal betterment. Their engagement brings new perspectives, innovative solutions, and a steadfast commitment to health and wellness to the industry, heralding a promising future for health tourism led by visionary women.

5. Challenges faced by Women Entrepreneurs in Health Tourism

The challenges women face in health tourism entrepreneurship are multi-dimensional and complex, highlighting diverse obstacles that need to be addressed with tailored strategies and support mechanisms.

5.1. Financial access and funding

Limited access to financial resources is a significant barrier for women entrepreneurs in health tourism, as in many sectors. This issue is accentuated in fields that demand considerable initial investments in infrastructure, certification and advanced technology. Traditional financial institutions often harbour biases, perceiving female-led ventures as riskier propositions. The requirement for substantial start-up capital is particularly demanding in health tourism due to the stringent regulatory standards governing health services and tourism integration (Marsha, 2016).

5.2. Work-life integration

Another critical challenge is balancing professional commitments with personal and family responsibilities. This balance is difficult for women entrepreneurs who navigate societal expectations of their roles as primary caregivers. The unique demands of health tourism businesses, including irregular working hours and extensive customer engagement, exacerbate this challenge, potentially leading to stress and reduced effectiveness in both personal and business roles (Lepeley et al., 2020).

5.3. Navigating male-dominated fields

The health tourism industry, like many others, often features male-dominated leadership, posing difficulties for women seeking to gain respect and establish their

presence. This environment can hinder women's ability to secure recognition and navigate a business landscape that may not account for their specific challenges. The lack of mentorship opportunities, business networks, and access to industry insights, often found within male-dominated spheres, further complicates their entrepreneurial journey (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2023).

5.4. Confronting gender bias

Women entrepreneurs in health tourism frequently encounter gender biases and stereotypes that question their competence, risk management and leadership abilities. These biases can be particularly detrimental in an industry where success heavily relies on personal interactions and trust-building with clients. Stereotypical views of women primarily as caregivers rather than as competent business leaders can influence a range of interactions, from securing investments to forging partnerships (McKinsey Global Institute, 2019).

A holistic approach is necessary to navigate these challenges, encompassing efforts to improve access to funding specifically designed for women, facilitate networking and mentorship opportunities and cultivate an industry culture that embraces diversity and gender equality (UNWTO, 2019).

The increasing availability of resources and support networks for women in health tourism and related fields is a positive trend toward creating a more equitable environment. These initiatives aim to dismantle barriers and celebrate the contributions of women, paving the way for a future where the health tourism sector is as diverse as the clients it serves and rich with opportunities for innovation and growth (Sindhura, 2022).

6. Conclusions

An in-depth analysis of the health tourism industry elucidated its dual facets of wellness and medical services that collectively cater to a growing demographic of health-conscious travellers.

Exploring the health tourism industry reveals a sector rich with innovation and growth potential, significantly influenced by women's entrepreneurial spirit. These leaders are not merely participating in the industry, but at the forefront, reshaping the future of health-oriented travel in Europe and Romania through a unique blend of traditional resources and contemporary offerings.

Key motivational factors, such as personal fulfilment, market potential, and societal impact, were identified for women in the industry. However, they also face substantial obstacles, including financial constraints, work-life balance, and gender biases.

The motivations of women in the health tourism industry are deeply intertwined with personal, market, and societal dimensions. They are driven by a desire for personal fulfilment, a recognition of the market potential, and a commitment to making a societal impact. However, they also grapple with significant challenges, including financial access, balancing multiple responsibilities, and navigating gender biases.

Further advocacy is necessary for continued support and resource allocation to overcome gender disparities and foster an environment where women's entrepreneurial contributions are recognized and valued in health tourism.

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