

Women-Led Homestays in the Kumaon Region: Empowerment, Sustainability, and Community-Based Tourism

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the phenomenon of women-led homestays in the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand, India, as a sustainable tourism model contributing to rural women's empowerment and community development. Drawing on qualitative documentary analysis and case studies from across Kumaon, the study explores how women entrepreneurs navigate traditional gender roles while leveraging hospitality skills and local cultural heritage. The research employs a feminist care ethics framework to analyse the gender-specific challenges and opportunities facing women homestay entrepreneurs. Findings reveal that women-led homestays generate significant economic benefits, enhance social agency, and contribute to cultural preservation and environmental stewardship. However, persistent barriers include the "motherhood penalty," gender-based divisions of entrepreneurial labour, and deep-rooted social conditioning. The study contributes to feminist tourism scholarship and offers practical insights for policymakers seeking to develop inclusive, sustainable tourism initiatives in mountain communities.

Keywords: women entrepreneurship, homestays, sustainable tourism, Kumaon region, feminist care ethics, community-based tourism

INTRODUCTION

The Himalayan state of Uttarakhand has witnessed a significant transformation in its tourism landscape over the past two decades, with homestays emerging as a vital component of sustainable rural development. The Kumaon region, traditionally known for its colonial-era hill stations and scenic beauty, has become a site where women are increasingly taking leadership roles in hospitality entrepreneurship (Roy, 2023). This paper investigates the phenomenon of women-led homestays in the Kumaon region, exploring how these enterprises function as sites of economic empowerment, cultural preservation, and gendered negotiation.

The Kumaon region, comprising districts of Nainital, Almora, Pithoragarh, Champawat, and Bageshwar, offers a distinctive context for studying women's entrepreneurship. The region is characterized by mountainous terrain, high rates of male out-migration, and rich cultural traditions that shape women's roles and opportunities. Homestay tourism has emerged as a response to these conditions, providing alternative livelihoods that allow families to remain in their ancestral villages while generating income from tourism (American India Foundation, 2019).

The significance of this study lies in its intersection with broader scholarly conversations about women's entrepreneurship in rural India, sustainable tourism development, and gender equity in mountain economies. Research indicates that women-owned Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in tourism-related sectors are growing across India, with women increasingly taking leadership roles in hospitality and community-based tourism initiatives (Elam et al., 2022).

This research addresses three primary questions: (1) What are the socio-economic impacts of women-led homestays in the Kumaon region? (2) What gender-specific challenges do women homestay entrepreneurs face? (3) How does the feminist care ethics framework illuminate the distinctive practices and contributions of women homestay operators?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women's Entrepreneurship in Rural Tourism

The intersection of gender and entrepreneurship in tourism contexts has garnered increasing scholarly attention. Figueroa-Domecq et al. (2020) note that tourism entrepreneurship has often been framed in gender-neutral terms, obscuring the distinctive challenges and contributions of women entrepreneurs. In rural India, women's tourism entrepreneurship frequently emerges from traditional domestic roles, such as cooking, hospitality, and craft production, thus transforming these culturally prescribed activities into sources of income and agency (American India Foundation, 2019).

Research by Elam et al. (2022) in the *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor* highlights persistent gender gaps in entrepreneurial ecosystems, with women facing structural barriers including limited access to capital, networks, and markets. However, the homestay model presents unique opportunities for women, as it leverages existing household assets and aligns with culturally acceptable roles. Women are traditionally viewed as homemakers and nurturers, and homestay entrepreneurship allows them to extend these roles into income-generating activities while remaining within domestic spaces (Roy, 2023).

Feminist Care Ethics and Tourism

The feminist care ethics framework, as articulated by scholars such as Boluk et al. (2022), provides a valuable lens for understanding women's tourism entrepreneurship. This perspective emphasizes relationality, responsibility, and the embeddedness of economic activity within networks of care. Carnicelli and Boluk (2021) argue that applying a care ethic to tourism "socializes" tourism activities, prioritizing community wellbeing over purely economic outcomes.

Janhavi Prasada, operator of Abbotsford homestay in Nainital, articulates this perspective when she states that "hospitality is all about nurturing your guests so that they go back with a sense of fulfilment, not depletion" (She The People, 2019). This framing positions hospitality as an extension of care work rather than merely a commercial transaction.

Similarly, Himalya Resort, a family-owned homestay located in the Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary, exemplifies a deeply rooted tradition of hospitality. The mother, grandmothers, and other family members are actively engaged in hosting guests. They articulate their approach by viewing each guest as an elder member of the family, reflecting the cultural ethos of *Atithi Devo Bhava*, which means "The guest is equivalent to God." Consequently, they endeavour to provide a level of comfort aligned with guests' expectations, while remaining mindful that visitors seek an immersive experience of the forest and village life (The Better India, 2024).

Homestay Tourism in the Indian Himalayas

Homestay tourism has emerged as a significant development strategy across the Indian Himalayas, promoted for its potential to distribute tourism benefits more equitably than conventional hotel-based tourism. The Uttarakhand government has actively supported homestay development through various schemes, recognizing its role in promoting rural livelihoods and reducing out-migration (Roy, 2023).

Recent initiatives across Kumaon demonstrate the potential of community-based tourism models. Organizations such as Aarohi, Village Ways, and Himmotthan Society have developed homestay networks across multiple districts, with women playing central roles as hosts and guides (American India Foundation, 2019; Roy, 2023; The Better India, 2024). These initiatives are designed to create sustainable income opportunities while preserving the region's cultural and environmental heritage.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in feminist care ethics, which offers a critical alternative to masculinist models of entrepreneurship that privilege competition, individual achievement, and profit maximization. Feminist care

ethics emphasizes the moral significance of relationships, interdependence, and responsibility for others. Within tourism contexts, women tourism entrepreneurs often adopt “regenerative” approaches that prioritize community and environmental wellbeing (Boluk et al., 2022).

The framework also illuminates how patriarchal structures constrain women’s entrepreneurship. Gender role expectations and social conditioning create distinct barriers for women entrepreneurs, shaping their opportunities, resources, and aspirations. As Prasada notes, “the age-old history dating back to hundreds of centuries set a pattern in place where women have always borne the brunt of physical, mental and societal pressures—that has become the DNA of men—the way they treat women and, to a large extent, the way women see themselves as second fiddle” (She The People, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative documentary analysis, drawing on multiple sources of evidence to construct a comprehensive picture of women-led homestays in the Kumaon region. Data sources include:

1. Case study documentation: Detailed case studies from organizations documenting women homestay entrepreneurs across Kumaon, including the Sunkiya Community Homestay project (Kumaon Build, n.d.).
2. Media reports: Journalistic accounts of women-led tourism initiatives in the region, including coverage of the Indian Army’s homestay initiatives in border villages (Asianet News able, 2025; Money control, 2025; News18, 2025; The Statesman, 2024).
3. Organizational reports: Publications from development organizations such as Aarohi, Village Ways, and the American India Foundation documenting women’s entrepreneurship (American India Foundation, 2019; The Better India, 2024).
4. Academic and professional literature: Research articles and interviews with women homestay operators (Boluk et al., 2022; Carnicelli & Boluk, 2021; SheThePeople, 2019).

The study acknowledges the limitation that primary fieldwork, including interviews with homestay operators across Kumaon, was not conducted, and thus findings should be considered exploratory. Data analysis employed thematic analysis, with themes derived deductively from the feminist care ethics framework and inductively from the source materials.

FINDINGS

The Landscape of Women-Led Homestays in Kumaon

The Kumaon region has witnessed significant growth in women-led hospitality enterprises across diverse contexts. Among the most prominent is Abbotsford, a heritage homestay in Nainital operated by writer-activist Janhavi Prasada. The property, acquired by her great-grandparents in 1903, was opened to guests in 2007 as a means of maintaining the historic structure while creating a space for cultural exchange. Abbotsford hosts writers’ residencies, the Himalayan Echoes literature festival, and emphasizes responsible tourism practices including litter-free forest walks (SheThePeople, 2019).

In the Peora and Satkol villages of Almora district, the non-profit organization Aarohi has facilitated the development of women-led homestays. Maya, a homestay operator in Peora, represents this model. She describes using online booking applications to host guests from around the world and notes the importance of digital literacy for her business. The organization has helped villagers develop sustainable income opportunities without requiring migration from the hilly region situated 6,600 feet above sea level (American India Foundation, 2019).

The Sunkiya Community Homestay project, a rural tourism initiative in a Kumaoni village, exemplifies collective women’s entrepreneurship. Each homestay in the village is managed by women, enabling them to

achieve financial independence, strengthen their confidence, and develop as rural entrepreneurs. The project emphasizes sensitive, deliberate approaches to upgrading traditional village homes while preserving original architectural character, including existing mud walls, timber beams, and stone flooring. Local art forms like Aipan are thoughtfully incorporated, imparting narrative depth and artisanal character to the spaces (KumaonBuild, n.d.).

Juhi Koranga, a woman entrepreneur from Almora, has developed Kumaon Safar, a company promoting indigenous mountain tourism through immersive, eco-conscious travel experiences. Her itineraries emphasize slow travel and conscious tourism, with visitors staying in traditional Kumaoni wooden cottages. She focuses on preserving Janjati (indigenous) culture and promoting sustainable tourism practices. According to reports, most of her guests are repeat visitors from affluent Western countries including the USA, UK, Canada, Australia, and Germany (Organiser, 2025).

The Indian Army has also contributed to women-led homestay development in border areas of Kumaon through Operation Sadbhavna. Tent-based homestays have been established in Garbyang and Kalapani, border villages with strategic and spiritual significance. These facilities are handed over to village committees for independent management, creating economic opportunities for local communities. The initiative aligns with the Government of India's Vibrant Villages Programme, which promotes sustainable tourism and community-driven development in remote border areas. The tariff is set at Rs 1,000 per person per night, inclusive of meals, with the village committee managing bookings (Asianet Newsable, 2025; Moneycontrol, 2025; News18, 2025; The Statesman, 2024).

Economic Impacts

Women-led homestays generate multiple streams of economic benefit for individual operators and communities. For individual women, homestay income provides financial independence and household support. Maya of Peora describes having stable income, a home, and a small farm where she grows produce, while being able to educate her children in good schools and colleges in Almora (American India Foundation, 2019).

The Sunkiya project enables women to achieve financial independence and develop as rural entrepreneurs. By creating sustainable eco-tourism and providing meaningful livelihood opportunities, the project allows women to earn income while preserving their ancestral way of life in harmony with water, forest, and land (KumaonBuild, n.d.).

Border village homestay initiatives have created direct employment opportunities for villagers. The Garbyang tent-based homestay provides income to the local community while also encouraging reverse migration, motivating locals to return to their villages. This economic development supports the long-term goal of repopulating border areas that have experienced out-migration (Asianet Newsable, 2025; Moneycontrol, 2025).

Beyond direct income, women's earnings often support family investments. Prasada notes that women in Kumaon bear the economic brunt of running families, with 91 percent of women in rural areas engaged in farm jobs, weaving, knitting, pickle-making, and organic herb and spice cultivation. Many of these products are sourced by brands, creating sustainable living conditions that allow women to earn without selling their land and moving to cities (SheThePeople, 2019).

Social Empowerment and Agency

Beyond economic impacts, women homestay operators report significant gains in confidence, social standing, and agency. Maya's statement about her life in Peora reflects this transformation: "I am grateful to be here... Today, we have a stable income, a place to call home, a small farm where we grow our produce, we educate our kids... why run in the rat race, when you can have it all here" (American India Foundation, 2019).

The Sunkiya project aims to strengthen women's confidence and develop them as rural entrepreneurs. By entrusting homestay management to women, the project enables them to develop business skills, interact with visitors, and take leadership roles in their communities. The collaborative process of developing the homestays,

which involves local craftsmanship and lived knowledge, also cultivates a strong sense of community pride and collective ownership (KumaonBuild, n.d.).

Prasada emphasizes the importance of visible women leaders: “Very important, as women with their EQ bring life to any domain of work that they are associated with, rather than the typical black and white structures” (SheThePeople, 2019). She notes that women sarpanchs, social workers, and entrepreneurs serve as ambassadors of their regions and must be heard.

Cultural Preservation and Regenerative Tourism

Women-led homestays often incorporate elements of cultural preservation. Traditional architecture is valued and maintained; Abbotsford’s mud-stone walls and wooden interiors exemplify this approach. The dinner service at Abbotsford uses recipes from Prasada’s grandmother, sometimes cooked on a wood fire (SheThePeople, 2019).

The Sunkiya project carefully preserves traditional building techniques, using local patal stone and indigenous wood for texture and durability. The engagement of local villagers, along with their craftsmanship and deep understanding of traditional practices, enriches the design process with cultural depth and authenticity. The incorporation of local art forms like Aipan imparts narrative depth and fine artisanal character to the spaces (KumaonBuild, n.d.).

Juhi Koranga’s work focuses specifically on preserving Janjati (indigenous) culture in Kumaon. Her itineraries showcase the region’s tribal communities, including Tharus, Bhutiyas, Jaunsaris, Buksas, and Rajis, highlighting their distinctive lifestyles, belief systems, cuisine, jewelry design, and folklore. The emphasis is on immersion and engagement with local communities, with visitors staying in traditional Kumaoni wooden cottages that offer 360-degree views of snow-covered Himalayan peaks (Organiser, 2025).

The regenerative tourism concept positions women as custodians of fragile mountain ecosystems. Prasada demonstrates this by taking charge of the forest behind Abbotsford, ensuring it remains litter-free. She carries bags during walks and has her staff do the same, collecting litter as they go—what she describes as “a drop in the ocean but a pearl drop indeed” (SheThePeople, 2019).

Gender-Specific Challenges

Despite these positive developments, women homestay entrepreneurs face persistent gender-based barriers. Prasada articulates the challenge succinctly: “It’s the men that need to be gender sensitive about women” (SheThePeople, 2019). She notes that small towns like Nainital must incorporate infrastructure and services through the prism of gender priority.

The double burden of domestic and entrepreneurial work remains a significant challenge. Women in Kumaon are described as “hardy, working and educated” but also bear responsibility for field work, gathering firewood, cooking, and cleaning homes in addition to entrepreneurial activities (SheThePeople, 2019). This aligns with the “motherhood penalty” identified in feminist entrepreneurship literature, where women bear disproportionate responsibility for domestic care work even as they engage in income-generating activities (Elam et al., 2022).

Social conditioning and gender norms create additional barriers. Prasada notes that women often see themselves as “second fiddle” due to long histories of physical, mental, and societal pressures (SheThePeople, 2019). This internalized limitation requires sustained support to overcome.

Structural barriers include limited infrastructure and connectivity. The hilly terrain and remote locations of many villages present logistical challenges for homestay operations. Poor connectivity makes it difficult for women entrepreneurs to fully tap into market demand for homestays. However, initiatives like the Indian Army’s work on village electrification and hybrid solar plants are addressing some of these infrastructure gaps (The Statesman, 2024).

Role of Support Organizations

The success of women-led homestays in Kumaon depends significantly on supportive institutional ecosystems. Aarohi, a non-profit organization, facilitates villages in becoming self-sustaining, eco-tourism spots, enabling inhabitants to open their doors to tourists for sustainable income (American India Foundation, 2019).

Village Ways, a social enterprise founded by Manisha Pande and Himanshu, encourages sustainable tourism in partnership with villages. They raised funds to create basic infrastructure in village homes that guests would need, then facilitated five homes (one in each village) beginning to host guests. As tourism increased, village youth were trained as guides to lead tourists through the Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary, learning about flora and fauna (The Better India, 2024).

The Indian Army's Operation Sadbhavna contributes to community development in border areas through village electrification, hybrid solar plants, medical camps, polyhouse farming, and essential infrastructure projects. These efforts aim to enhance living standards, support sustainable livelihoods, and integrate remote border villages with India's broader developmental framework (Asianet Newsable, 2025; The Statesman, 2024).

DISCUSSION

Homestays as Sites of Empowerment and Negotiation

The findings suggest that women-led homestays function as complex sites where empowerment and patriarchal constraint coexist. On one hand, women gain income, confidence, and social standing. On the other, they must navigate entrenched gender expectations that assign primary responsibility for domestic and care work to women.

This duality reflects the broader pattern of women's entrepreneurship in rural India, where economic participation offers pathways to agency while remaining embedded in structures that constrain women's choices. The feminist care ethics framework illuminates this complexity: women's entrepreneurship emerges from their traditional roles as caregivers and homemakers, but these roles also limit their capacity to expand and scale their enterprises (Boluk et al., 2022; Carnicelli & Boluk, 2021).

The Role of Supportive Ecosystems

The success of women-led homestays in Kumaon depends significantly on supportive institutional ecosystems. Organizations like Aarohi, Village Ways, and the Indian Army provide crucial training, financial support, and ongoing mentorship (American India Foundation, 2019; The Better India, 2024). The collective model, as demonstrated by the Sunkiya Community Homestay and the village committee-based management approach in Garbyang, facilitates the sharing of resources, knowledge, and marketing infrastructure among women (KumaonBuild, n.d.; News18, 2025).

Government policy also plays a role. The Vibrant Villages Programme, which supports homestay development in border areas, demonstrates how state-level commitment to community-led tourism can generate significant outcomes (Asianet Newsable, 2025; Moneycontrol, 2025).

Implications for Sustainable Tourism Development

Women-led homestays embody principles of sustainable tourism: they are locally owned, use existing resources, preserve cultural heritage, and generate community benefits. Responsible tourism practices, such as litter-free forest walks and traditional cuisine, contribute to environmental and cultural sustainability (SheThePeople, 2019).

The regenerative tourism framework positions women not merely as economic actors but as custodians of landscapes and traditions. This approach recognizes the interdependence of social, cultural, and environmental sustainability, consistent with feminist care ethics (Boluk et al., 2022).

Limitations and Future Research

This study's reliance on secondary sources limits its capacity to capture the full diversity of women homestay operators' experiences across Kumaon. Future research should conduct primary fieldwork, including in-depth interviews with homestay operators across different districts, to understand the nuances of their experiences, strategies, and aspirations.

Comparative research across different regions of Uttarakhand and other Himalayan states would illuminate how varying policy contexts and development approaches shape women's tourism entrepreneurship. Longitudinal studies would reveal whether women's homestay leadership translates into sustained empowerment across generations.

Methodological and Analytical Reflections

While this study relies primarily on qualitative documentary analysis, it is important to critically reflect on the implications of this methodological choice. The dependence on secondary sources, including media reports, organizational documents, and published case narratives, may limit the depth of insight into the nuanced, lived experiences of women homestay operators in the Kumaon region. Although these sources provide valuable insights and broad coverage, they often present curated or success-oriented narratives that require careful interpretation.

To address this limitation, the study adopts a critical reading of secondary materials, distinguishing between empirical evidence and illustrative accounts. Media sources are critically engaged with as socially constructed narratives shaped by institutional and ideological positions, rather than as neutral representations. To strengthen analytical credibility, these accounts are triangulated with academic literature and organizational reports wherever possible.

However, the lack of primary fieldwork, including in-depth interviews and participant observation, limits the depth of analysis. Direct interaction with women homestay entrepreneurs would have provided richer insights into the everyday negotiations of gender, labour, and care, as well as the inherent tensions between empowerment and constraint. Future research should therefore incorporate qualitative fieldwork across different districts of Kumaon to capture diverse voices and experiences.

This study goes beyond description by applying a feminist care ethics framework, interpreting key themes through relationality, interdependence, and care.

For instance, women's economic activities are not solely profit-driven but are embedded within household responsibilities and community wellbeing. Similarly, cultural preservation practices reflect forms of care for heritage, environment, and collective identity. However, the same framework also reveals how care responsibilities can reinforce gendered burdens, limiting women's entrepreneurial expansion.

Finally, situating the findings within broader global debates highlights the wider relevance of this study. Women-led homestays in Kumaon mirror similar initiatives across the Global South, where entrepreneurship intersects with livelihood, culture, and ecology, contributing to global discussions on gender and sustainable rural development.

CONCLUSION

Women-led homestays in the Kumaon region represent a significant development in sustainable tourism and rural women's empowerment. These enterprises generate economic benefits, enhance women's agency and confidence, preserve cultural traditions, and contribute to environmental stewardship. From the heritage elegance of Abbotsford in Nainital to the community-led model of Sunkiya and the border initiatives in Garbyang and Kalapani, women across Kumaon are transforming hospitality into pathways for empowerment.

Applying a feminist care ethics framework illuminates these enterprises by foregrounding how women's entrepreneurial practices are relationally constituted within networks of care that extend across families, communities, and ecological landscapes. This perspective suggests that supporting women-led homestays requires not merely economic interventions but also attention to the gendered structures that shape women's lives.

For policymakers and development practitioners, the findings suggest several priorities: continued investment in training and mentorship for women entrepreneurs, development of collective models that enable resource-sharing and peer support, recognition of the care responsibilities that women bear, and integration of gender equity goals into sustainable tourism policies.

As Janhavi Prasada advises aspiring women entrepreneurs in Kumaon, success lies not merely in running a hotel but in integrating into the local landscape and its people (SheThePeople, 2019). This integration of economic activity with cultural preservation, environmental stewardship, and community wellbeing reflects the broader promise of women-led homestays in the Himalayan region.

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