



Investigating Barriers to the Development of Handicrafts and Sustainable Rural Tourism from the Perspective of Rural Women Entrepreneurs (A Case Study of the Villages of Torbat-e Jam and Taybad Counties)

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ABSTRACT

Handicrafts, as one of the most prominent manifestations of local culture and the rural creative economy, play a fundamental role in strengthening livelihoods, promoting entrepreneurship, and enhancing the social sustainability of local communities. This study aimed to identify the capacities and challenges of rural women's handicrafts and to elucidate their linkage with rural tourism in Torbat-e Jam and Taybad Counties. The study was applied in terms of purpose and qualitative and exploratory in terms of methodology, employing the Strauss and Corbin grounded theory approach. Data were collected through 20 semi-structured interviews with women handicraft producers, experts, and managers in the field of cultural heritage. The data were analyzed using MAXQDA software through three stages of open, axial, and selective coding. The findings resulted in the identification of 329 initial concepts, 24 axial categories, and one core category entitled "Empowering Rural Women through Handicrafts and Rural Tourism." The findings indicated that the major challenges included inadequate marketing and advertising infrastructure, limited financial capital, the absence of adequate support and insurance systems, unequal competition with industrial products, economic instability, cultural constraints, and ineffective legislative policies. In contrast, capacities such as intergenerational indigenous skills, a favorable geographical location, proximity to the Dogharoun border, and location along tourism routes in Razavi Khorasan provide opportunities for developing local entrepreneurial clusters and establishing effective linkages between handicrafts and rural tourism. Based on the findings, developing women's handicraft clusters, establishing cooperative workshops, providing digital marketing training, strengthening local branding, leveraging the potential of religious tourism in Mashhad, and ensuring sustained institutional support can serve as key strategies for the economic and social empowerment of rural women and the achievement of sustainable regional development. Furthermore, strengthening collaboration among local institutions, rural communities, and tourism stakeholders can enhance the effectiveness of these strategies.

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Introduction

Rural handicrafts contribute to cultural heritage preservation, livelihood diversification, women's economic participation, and rural tourism. Their flexible, household-based nature makes handicraft production particularly relevant to rural women. However, Iranian rural handicraft enterprises face several challenges, including weak marketing, limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure and institutional support, ineffective branding, competition from industrial and imported products, and limited adaptation to changing consumer preferences. Women producers may also encounter additional constraints related to household responsibilities, restricted mobility, weak networks, and limited entrepreneurial and digital skills.

Torbat-e Jam and Taybad counties in Razavi Khorasan Province have rich traditions of weaving and embroidery, with skills transmitted across generations. Their proximity to the Dogharoun border, tourism routes, and Mashhad provides opportunities for connecting handicrafts with tourism. Nevertheless, these cultural and geographical assets do not automatically lead to sustainable economic development. Therefore, this study identifies the major barriers facing rural women handicraft entrepreneurs and examines the causal, contextual, and intervening conditions affecting sustainable handicraft and rural tourism development in the study area.

Method

The study employed a qualitative, exploratory design to understand the experiences, perceptions, constraints, opportunities, and adaptive responses of rural women engaged in handicraft production. Grounded theory, based on the Strauss and Corbin framework, was used to identify relationships among categories and develop an explanatory model of barriers and potential development pathways. The study covered 15 villages across six rural districts in Torbat-e Jam and Taybad counties. The villages contained concentrated household-based handicraft activities, with approximately 6,658 households and more than 24,000 residents. Major activities included fert and textile weaving, carpet weaving, kilim weaving, needlework, crochet, hand embroidery, and coin embroidery. Twenty participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Most were rural women handicraft producers, complemented by cultural heritage and tourism specialists. In-depth interviews continued until theoretical saturation.

Interview transcripts were analyzed in MAXQDA using open, axial, and selective coding. Open coding generated 329 concepts, which were continuously compared and consolidated into 24 axial categories. Selective coding identified the central category and relationships among causal, contextual, and intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, researcher triangulation, and systematic documentation, consistent with Lincoln and Guba's criteria. The theoretical structure explains how barriers constrain handicraft capabilities and sustainable entrepreneurship.

Results

The analysis generated 329 concepts, 24 axial categories, and the central category "rural artisans as potential entrepreneurs surrounded by actual challenges." This category expresses the core paradox: rural women possess cultural, productive, and entrepreneurial capacities, but these remain partly unrealized within restrictive institutional, economic, social, and infrastructural conditions. Causal conditions included macro-level political, economic, and planning challenges; inadequate branding and information systems; unequal competition between handmade and industrial products; unstable markets associated with declining tourism demand; limited financial resources; insufficient legislative and planning support; and weak institutional implementation. Rising production costs and imported or machine-made products reduced competitiveness and constrained producers' ability to sustain production.

A finding concerned weak marketing, branding, and information systems. Producers often lacked professional packaging, product information, digital promotion, and market-research knowledge. Dependence on traditional sales channels and intermediaries consequently reduced market reach and bargaining power. Contextual conditions included limited awareness of tourism opportunities, inadequate institutional support, underused tourism capacities, and insufficient policy recognition of handicrafts as cultural and economic assets. Intervening conditions included difficulties obtaining raw materials, cultural restrictions on women's economic participation, inadequate production spaces, negative perceptions of household-based work, insufficient professional support, and weak rural physical and cultural infrastructure.

Participants described several strategies for overcoming these constraints: expanding multidimensional institutional support; creating cooperative mechanisms for raw-material procurement and distribution; strengthening producer networks; improving product quality and design; developing digital marketing skills; enhancing branding; and increasing social capital. Cooperative workshops were considered valuable because they could integrate production, training, marketing, networking, and tourism functions. Another priority was distinguishing authentic handmade products from industrial and imported imitations. Emphasizing authenticity, craftsmanship, cultural meaning, provenance, and place-based identity could shift competition from price toward differentiated value.

The consequences of existing conditions included declining interest among younger generations, unstable occupational outcomes, low financial returns, and uncertainty about the future of handicraft occupations. Weak profitability discouraged intergenerational transmission of traditional skills, while intermediary dependence limited producers' share of final market value. Overall, the central problem is not insufficient production capacity but weak connections among capabilities, markets, institutions, infrastructure, tourism, finance, and knowledge networks. Handicraft development is therefore a systemic rather than merely technical challenge.

Conclusions

Rural women in Torbat-e Jam and Taybad have substantial cultural, social, and entrepreneurial potential, but interconnected micro-, meso-, and macro-level barriers limit its conversion into sustainable livelihoods. The findings highlight the need for an integrated, place-based approach. At the micro level, strengthening entrepreneurial, digital, marketing, design, and financial skills is essential, while at the meso and macro levels, stronger cooperatives and producer networks, improved branding and tourism infrastructure, better access to finance and insurance, market regulation, and institutional coordination are required.

The study also highlights the potential of integrating handicrafts with rural tourism. Production workshops can serve as cultural and experiential tourism spaces, while the Dogharoun border, local cultural assets, tourism connections, and proximity to Mashhad provide opportunities for developing handicraft-tourism networks. Overall, sustainable development requires coordinated, gender-responsive, and market-oriented support across the handicraft value chain, enabling handicrafts to contribute to women's entrepreneurship, heritage preservation, and sustainable rural development.

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