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Gender and Rural Tourism in Western Hungary

Abstract

In post-productivist rural Hungary tourism has become a new source of employment. The isolation of western border regions under socialism protected the environment making these areas attractive to today’s eco-tourists. Gender roles in Hungarian rural tourism differ from those in North America and Western Europe with Hungarian women being more likely to become independent tourism entrepreneurs. Women usually provide accommodation and meals while men concentrate on offering facilities for sports such as fishing and horse riding. There is a growing dependence on the internet for marketing to foreign consumers as Hungarians have little interest in this type of tourism.

Keywords: rural tourism, gender roles, ecotourism, border regions, internet

Rural tourism is a type of alternative tourism and includes a range of specialist types of tourism such as ecotourism, agritourism, farm tourism and nature tourism. It may be defined as ‘a tourism type generally construed as encompassing the more benign alternatives to large-scale, externally controlled Mass Tourism models’ (Fennell and Weaver, 1997:467). It is of growing importance in many parts of the world. In Western Europe and North America the expansion of rural tourism is related to the transformation of rural space. Rural areas have shifted from their traditional productivist role to one where aesthetics, recreation and preservation of environmental quality have become equally important. The countryside has thus become a place for consumption of the idea of nature and rurality (Paquette and Domon 2003, Urry 1995, Garcia Ramon 1995, Ilbery 1998, Murdoch et al. 2003). The romantic notion of the
search for the rural idyll and the positive value now attached to nature and the countryside are seen as the main causes for the growth of rural tourism. The concept of commodifying nature as a way of preserving biological and cultural diversity has become a key point in many conservation and rural development strategies. This approach has now been introduced to the new members of the European Union. In Hungary rural tourism has been growing rapidly over the last decade especially in the western border areas.

As the borders of the European Union changed with the addition of several East European countries in 2004, an understanding of the economies of the new border regions becomes of wider interest. In post-socialist countries, inextricably linked to the transition to democracy was the encouragement of private enterprise, which has been seen as having generally detrimental effects for both women and rural areas. However, these changes introduced an element of choice into the lives of women and men by increasing the range of possibilities and opportunities for livelihood strategies which differ between urban and rural areas. Rural tourism offers a new source of income for rural families affected by the land privatisation of the 1990s and opportunities for new gender roles.

In Western Europe and North America rural tourism is generally seen as part of farm multifunctionality, adding to farm household income and predominantly undertaken by farm women (Donaldson, 2002; Reynolds 2005; Canoves and Villarino, 2002). In the post-socialist transition in Eastern Europe rural tourism is seen very differently. It is considered a survival strategy for families who have lost employment as large co-operatives were closed but cannot leave rural areas because they own rural houses and cannot afford to live in the city. Thus Hungarian rural tourism is very much a family occupation in which men and women have distinctive roles. In the western border areas of Hungary the environment is relatively unspoiled as development in these regions was restricted during the Cold War era. This historical inheritance has meant that in these border areas rural tourism is seen as a way of exploiting this environment. It is made possible by proximity to Western Europe which serves as a source of wealthy tourists who appreciate the unspoilt countryside (Momsen, Sz Kukorelli and Timar, 2005).

This paper presents findings from two research projects: one undertaken from 1998 to 2003 on the western border of the county of Gyr-Moson-Sopron and a more recent (2004) study of rural tourism in the Danube area of the same county. One study included border zones along the frontier with Austria and the other along the frontier with Slovakia. Both studies were based on household surveys of entrepreneurs.
Rural Tourism in Western Hungary

Rural tourism has become one of the main growth industries in north-west Hungary and accession to the European Union in 2004 gave it further impetus. Tourists come to enjoy the bi-national Fertő-Hanság National Park, historic buildings and the bicycle paths through the peaceful countryside. They also come to take advantage of the cheap and excellent dentistry of the region. Women run guesthouses, restaurants and souvenir shops. Traditions of horsemanship are also important in attracting visitors and tourists are offered horse riding and excursions in horse-drawn carriages, usually under the guidance of men. As MacCannell [MacCannell: 1999] has noted nostalgia and authenticity are key elements of the attractiveness of a tourist area especially to visitors from post-industrial urban areas such as those of Western Europe. Lippard [Lippard 1999: 5] reinforces this when she suggests that ‘All voluntary travel is characterised by longing for some elusive element that lies out of reach of daily life’. Economic growth in the 21st century has become increasingly focused on the areas in proximity to tourist attractions and border crossings. These rural areas are now attracting immigrants from elsewhere in the country as tourism expands.

Rural tourism in western Hungary includes activities such as bird watching, use of thermal baths and heritage tourism as well as the more active pursuits of cycling, horse riding and hunting. Unusually, it also includes medical (dental) tourism in both rural and urban border areas. A growing awareness of the value of the environment and cultural resources such as historical buildings like the Esterházy Palace and the local traditional skills of horsemanship is making local authorities and residents aware of the need to protect the environment. Remote and relatively unspoiled places are particularly appreciated by the new rural tourist (Canoves and Villarino Perez, 2002).

The change in status of rural border areas in Hungary since 1989 with the transition to democracy and increasingly open borders has given these areas a special attractiveness to tourists. These border regions contain unusually unspoil areas of countryside because, under socialism, they were more or less forbidden areas close to the Iron Curtain, closed to both Hungarian and to people from countries with different political systems. Thus they were protected from environmental damage seen in so many parts of the region. This is especially true of the Austrian frontier area but the area between the two branches of the Danube along the Slovakian border also remained relatively unspoiled. It is a typical agricultural area without resources for heavy industry
or mining. Thus today these areas, once markedly disadvantaged within socialist Hungary, have become highly advantaged in the new post-socialist Europe. Their combination of attractive unspoilt countryside and ease of access for tourists from Western Europe has become an even greater selling point since Hungary’s accession to the European Union in May 2004.

Rural tourism is seen as a way of diversifying incomes in rural areas. It offers a new source of income in a pluriactive multifunctional rural economy and provides an alternative to migration to the cities. This type of tourism is an activity carried out on a small scale and is often less seasonal than beach tourism. Thus it offers opportunities for small-scale entrepreneurs without causing too much pressure for change in rural areas. It may encourage improvement in infrastructure, especially roads, cycle paths and utilities, which are of benefit to local residents as well. This type of tourist is also interested in protecting the environment and local residents see the benefits of commodifying nature. This is important as tourism has the potential to damage the environment and even to spoil the original attraction so it needs to be well thought out and managed. MacCannell [MacCannell 1999:168] observed that modern nations have two separate but related approaches to the problem of tourism:

1. community planning for tourism in developed economies where there are too many tourists; and
2. the creation of new tourist facilities and interest in modernising communities to draw some of the tourists out of the already overcrowded areas and distribute the wealth more evenly.

Hungary is undertaking both these approaches by encouraging rural tourism to draw visitors away from the traditional tourist Meccas of Budapest and Lake Balaton at the national level. At the community level, local village authorities are seeking ways to advertise their tourist offerings and make their villages more attractive by planting flowers, removing litter and improving direction signs (Personal Communication 1997).

‘Rural tourism encourages a re-evaluation of rural life in which the landscape becomes a valued resource,’ (Canoves and Villarino Perez 2002). Thus tourism may encourage preservation of the environment in this region of western Hungary.

**Gender Roles in Tourism**

Rural tourism is also seen as being especially attractive to women entrepreneurs (Canoves and Villarino Perez 2002; Garcia-Ramon et al. 1995).
Women's role is generally focused on providing hospitality to visitors and is seen as an extension of their family social reproductive roles. Many rural women also appreciate meeting strangers and learning about new places as they often feel isolated in small villages. In Western Europe rural tourism gives rural women status and they enjoy providing locally produced foods and introducing tourists to regional gastronomy (Canoves and Villarino Perez 2002; Bessière 1998; Reynolds 2005). This focus on local food has not yet become important in Hungarian rural tourism, but has recently started to become more popular.

**Gender and Tourism on the Austrian Border**

In the western border region of Hungary it is especially noticeable that more women than men are learning German in order to communicate with tourists, who come predominantly from Austria, Germany, Switzerland and Holland. In this area 64 per cent of men and 78 per cent of women spoke at least one language in addition to Hungarian. The main language spoken in the west was German (48 per cent of men and 58 per cent of women). English has now replaced Russian as the most widely taught language in schools but its introduction to the curriculum is so recent we did not expect it to be used by entrepreneurs. Two per cent of men entrepreneurs and five per cent of women entrepreneurs spoke English probably because of the importance of tourism. In this border region many of the languages of neighbouring countries were spoken, such as Serbian, Croatian, Italian, Czech and Polish, but no single language dominated as a third most common language. Two per cent of both men and women in the west spoke French. Interest in learning languages is both at individual and community level. In Jánossomorja¹, the largest village in the study area on the Austrian border, the mayor told us proudly that the local high school, which teaches German and English, had two students in the top six in the county for languages in 1998 (Jánossomorja, 1998, interview).

Some of these languages were also learned while travelling and working in other countries. Most of this travel had been undertaken since 1990. It was assumed that those who had worked outside Hungary would have brought back not only capital for investment but also ideas, experience and contacts they could use in their businesses. In the border area of Győr-Moson-Sopron County 19.2 per cent of male entrepreneurs and 12 per cent of women entrepreneurs had lived and worked abroad. Most of these individuals had worked in Austria,

¹ Jánossomorja became a town in 2003 (after the interview).
often illegally. Some families in this area were also sending their children across the border to Austrian schools to learn German at an early age. These are all indications of the transnational attitudes and cosmopolitanism of rural entrepreneurs in the western border regions of Hungary which prepare them for work in tourism.

We surveyed 17 villages on the western border of Hungary in 1998. In western Hungary of the 829 registered entrepreneurs in the seventeen villages visited, 33.8 per cent were women. We interviewed thirty per cent of the entrepreneurs listed in border villages in the county of Győr-Moson-Sopron in the summer of 1998. The sample was stratified by gender and by the three major sectors of the economy and included 250 entrepreneurs in 17 villages, made up of 125 women and 125 men. Foreign visitors and foreign guest nights in 1996 were concentrated in five villages in the study area. In 1996 Hegyeshalom reported 8644 foreign guest nights, Nagycenk 4445, Hegykő 4344, and Fertőrákos 1226. Bicycle paths, mainly for tourist use, had been constructed in this county during the early part of the transition but tourist services were limited. Tourism in the west has increased very rapidly since 1996 and now most western border villages offer considerable opportunities for entrepreneurs working in tourism, tourism services having improved enormously both in quantity and quality.

Women provided bed and breakfast, with nine establishments identified as dealing mainly with tourists. In the 17 villages studied there were six souvenir shops. One woman ran a riding school and both men and women ran the two horse carriage operations. Men in this field drove tourist horse-drawn carriages, rented out bicycles or acted as guides in the National Park. However, there were many other activities which were relevant to tourism although not limited to this. These included handicraft making, restaurants, ice-cream parlours, internet cafes, and personal services such as beauticians, masseuses and hairdressers. Some 69.2 per cent of women entrepreneurs and 24.8 per cent of male entrepreneurs were involved in such retail and personal services serving both residents and visitors. Other activities classified in the primary sector of agriculture, fishing, forestry and hunting occupied 5.1 per cent of women and 14.9 per cent of men. Many of the men acting as guides for tourists interested in bird watching, fishing and hunting came from this group as they had the necessary skills, although working with tourists was usually only a small part of their occupation. Both men and women classified in this occupational group ran riding schools and offered horse riding and village-to-village transportation in horse-drawn carriages to tourists.
Rural Tourism in Szigetköz Microregion

This microregion is the Hungarian pilot area for the European Eco-route project (see Figure 1). A survey of 95 tourism related enterprises was carried out in 2004 in order to obtain specific information about the characteristics of ecotourism related businesses. The survey was conducted in all 25 settlements in the pilot area with the number of questionnaires being roughly proportional to the size of settlement. The largest settlement is Mosommagyaróvár with 30,000 people or about half the area’s population. This town was an exception with only 17 per cent of questionnaires undertaken there. In four villages we carried out a higher level of sampling as these villages attracted many tourists because of their geographical locations on rivers or with a thermal bath as at Lipót. In these villages there were several entrepreneurs affected by and involved in ecotourism. Of the 95 interviews conducted, 43 or 45 per cent were with women.

From the interviews we were able to ascertain that 58 per cent of the entrepreneurs provided accommodation to tourists, 22 per cent ran restaurants and 26 per cent offered other tourism related services. These other services included a wide range of mainly ecotourism services: riding, fishing, camping, hiking and organising water sports. Most entrepreneurs offered ecotourism services either themselves or through external partners.

Some 53 per cent of the respondents offered fishing for tourists, 53 per cent riding, 50 per cent cycling tours and 45 per cent hiking. Most of these services are provided by external partners. If a guest wishes to participate in one of these activities the host can call a partner from a nearby village to take care of this. Such business partners are often relatives. Fishing is linked to fishing-lakes and riding to stables, both of which are popular in Szigetköz. Cycling tours and hiking are organised mainly by well-trained tour-guides and partly by the hosts themselves. Water sports are also popular in the region, 32 per cent of entrepreneurs offer canoeing, 29 per cent offer kayaking and 22 per cent offer other water sports. 20 per cent of the entrepreneurs interviewed are connected with hunting in the region. This business field is very profitable but whether it is a part of ecotourism is disputed. However, it is clearly a way of utilising an unspoilt environment and its very profitability may encourage the protection of animals and wild areas. Other aspects of rural tourism mentioned included providing guided tours of the regions’ cultural offerings mentioned by 20 per cent of entrepreneurs. Farm tourism was undertaken by 14 per cent of the entrepreneurs. The average tourism entrepreneur offers four ecotourism services
either directly or through other entrepreneurs specialising in such services. This micro region has developed a wide range of rural tourism activities.

Family Roles

Rural tourism entrepreneurs were usually strongly family oriented and dependent on family assistance. Women tended to be responsible for the provision of accommodation and meals with some assistance from daughters and other female relatives. The other services offered, especially those offering sports activities were usually provided by male family members or friends. Sometimes this would be a part-time occupation undertaken jointly with other rural work such as farming or construction. Cultural activities such as village festivals were usually organised by women.

The following case studies illustrate gender roles within family tourism businesses.

1. Katalin built a pension catering for tourists in the early 1990s. At that time her husband had another job and was not involved in tourist activities. He later lost his job so he joined his wife’s business but his role is secondary to hers.

2. Marika was the mayor in one of the villages studied. She promoted tourism activity and the marketing of the area not only because she was the mayor but also because she was President of the Szigetköz Development Association. She encouraged tourism in the village and surrounding area and provided accommodation for visitors. Her husband was a guide for canoe tourism while their son ran a rest stop and small leisure centre along the bicycle trail.

3. Ági is an energetic entrepreneur. Before 1989 she was a tax officer in the local government but when the opportunity arose she wanted to work for herself. Now she owns apartments which she rents to tourists. Her main interest is in bicycle tourism and she rents out bicycles to visitors. Her husband helps her at weekends in his spare time mainly with boating activities. Since he works in the construction industry he built the new apartments for visitors.

4. Mártta was a nursery school teacher under socialism and her husband was the manager of the local cooperative farm. After the transition she lost her job and started a tourism business. Her husband became a large landowner and has his own businesses which are quite separate from tourism. In this household rural tourism is not seen as being related to agriculture.
5. The Szelle horse ranch is a typical family-owned business with traditional gender roles. The husband looks after the horses and deals with visitors wanting to use the horses. His wife has a purely domestic role. Their daughter lives with her parents and studies agriculture at Pannon University. She helps in the family business by acting as a guide for the horse riding tours taken by visitors.

Clearly the roles of the various family members are dependent on the type of tourist facilities offered and the relative employment needs and interest in tourism of wife and husband. Sometimes the business interests of family members may be separate and unrelated, in other cases they may be separate but related, or they may all work together in the same business taking on different gendered tasks. These roles may vary over time as employment alternatives grow or decline for individuals. It is usually the wife who is first to start a tourism business. Unlike the situation in Western Europe and North America, her tourism business rarely grows out of her husband’s business but is quite separate. Men usually become involved part-time or if they lose their other jobs, and they have distinct roles providing facilities and guiding recreational activities.

Consumption and Marketing

Demand for tourism services is high among visitors according to 83 per cent of the respondents. Those who did not feel that it was important were those who catered to cyclists or one-day stay visitors. Entrepreneurs provide equipment (40%) training (15%), guide services (31%) or other services (18%). Among the guests 46 per cent were interested in water sports or bird watching and 37 per cent in hiking. There were more entrepreneurs offering cycling and horse riding services than the current demand which is becoming a problem. The most positive factors are the well established cycling routes while the negative ones are poor infrastructure for water sports in relation to high demand and a need to improve the standard of accommodation on offer.

In terms of future growth some sixty per cent of respondents wanted to expand their businesses to support more tourism activities, 22 per cent were not interested in expansion and 18 per cent did not answer this question. Most survey respondents said that currently over 60 per cent of their market was domestic but they wished to expand their market and attract more foreign visitors. This is related both to the higher spending of foreigners, mainly German and Austrian visitors, and partly to the perceived limited demand
among Hungarian tourists for rural tourism and ecotourism services. It appears
that at present interest in rural tourism is imported and domestic tourists have
yet to fully appreciate their rural environment as a holiday location.

There is some evidence that for West European visitors to the former
socialist countries there may be more interest in ecotourism among female than
among male visitors (Anastassova, 2002). Reynolds (2005) in a study of rural
tourism consumers in California found that the majority were female, under 55
years of age, well-educated and on relatively high incomes. Attitudes of the
various types of consumers of rural tourism need to be considered. Wealthier,
usually foreign, tourists give high priority to comfortable, modern accom-
modation, landscape protection, consumption of fresh locally grown foods and
the cultural traditions of music and horse riding (Reynolds 2005). On the other
hand, Hungarian tourists may have little interest in environmental protection
but be more interested in access to cheap accommodation and sports such as
fishing and boating, as under socialism. The interests of these two groups of
tourists may be incompatible.

Suggestions offered by interviewees for improvement in services and
attraction of foreign visitors varied. It was felt that the official labelling system
of the ‘sunflower’ created by the national rural tourism body was well
recognised and understood by visitors and functioned well. This is a different
attitude to one found in the late 1990s on the Austrian border. There many
accommodation owners felt that they got little benefit from being listed in the
national handbook produced by the authority and often did not even know that
they were listed as their names had been submitted by the mayor (Berg, 1999).

There was interest in sending people to training programmes among 47 per
cent of entrepreneurs. Such training programmes have been very successful,
especially among women in Catalonia, giving them confidence and helping
them make new friends and visit other areas of rural tourist activity (Personal
Communication, Bages, May, 2000).

Willingness to promote the micro-region as an ecotourism destination was
high but the way of doing so was not clearly understood. Interviewees felt that
the promotion of an integrated ecotourism product for the region, better
cooperation with tour operators and providing more information about
ecotourism were most important. It was also felt that local authorities could
help by paying more attention to the upkeep of services such as public showers,
garbage collection and mosquito control along river banks.

Marketing was seen as the key to expansion of tourism in this region. Unlike
the situation along the Austrian border in the late 1990s, most of the businesses
in Szigetköz had access to modern communication systems. Of those interviewed
93 per cent had a telephone, 80 per cent had a mobile phone and 59 per cent had a fax machine. Two thirds of entrepreneurs were computer literate and 68 per cent possessed computers. From the questionnaire survey it was found that 56 per cent of entrepreneurs use the internet on a regular basis and 53 per cent use it several times a day. A total of 71 per cent use the internet at least once a day and an additional 19 per cent use it weekly. This high level of connectedness indicates that most entrepreneurs have the possibility of networking. Currently most entrepreneurs use the internet to read the news (79%) and business offers (73%), send and receive email messages (66%) and to place advertisements (73%). In the future, most respondents wanted to enhance their use of the internet through increased emailing (43%) and advertising (38%), and 43 per cent wanted to develop their own website. They see the internet as a major marketing tool. The other marketing tool used as frequently as the internet was advertising in the brochures of Tourinform which has offices in all of the bigger settlements nationwide and also has international partners. Advertisements in other tourism brochures were used by 57 per cent of respondents, in newspapers and magazines by 40 per cent and roadside signs by 37 per cent. Due to lack of resources only six per cent of businesses ran advertisements outside Hungary permanently, 12 per cent annually and 4 per cent monthly.

**Conclusion**

The rural tourism operators in the two study areas feel a common fellowship and wish to develop the region but few are members of relevant associations. The Rural Tourism Association of Szigetköz is known to 62 per cent of the survey respondents but only a very few businesses were members. The national Rural Tourism Association is seen as of little help to individual entrepreneurs.

Most of the businesses surveyed in both areas were very small. In Szigetköz 30 per cent were sole proprietor businesses, 33 per cent employed 2 to 5 people and only 22 per cent employed more than five people. Fifteen per cent of those surveyed did not answer this question and they were probably small, one-person businesses. Family help is typical in all the tourism businesses. According to the survey 82 per cent of the businesses run all year though often offering fewer services in the winter. Overall, the ecotourism industry is capable of providing significant employment in Szigetköz without a very marked seasonal unemployment pattern.

It was felt that in order for ecotourism and other types of rural tourism to develop in western Hungary further training of entrepreneurs was needed.
A local development agency would help and in terms of marketing the entrepreneurs needed to identify niche markets and improve their labelling system. The strengths of rural tourism in both the regions studied lie in their rich natural and cultural heritage, easy access to the main motorway between Vienna and Budapest, bicycle tracks running through both areas, the existence of protected areas with a rich flora and fauna and a high number of innovative and well equipped service providers.

Rural tourism in western Hungary is developing very rapidly, especially in accessible border areas. The region has benefited by its lack of development under socialism so that it can now offer a relatively unspoiled environment. This is attractive to foreign tourists but more effort needs to be made in advertising outside Hungary and developing the language ability to assist the non-Hungarian-speaking tourists. Hungarian tourists also need to be encouraged to participate in this type of tourism which is new to many of them. In the last five years this part of Hungary has seen a very rapid expansion of tourism and it appears that this growth is accelerating.

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