

Township tourism can help grow female entrepreneurs

In 2017, the travel and tourism industry made up 9.5% (1.5 million) of total employment in South Africa and contributed 9% of the total gross domestic product (GDP), and although the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) forecasts that the sector will contribute R424.5bn to the overall South African economy in 2018, female representation in the sector remains low.



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Managing director at HVS Africa, Tim Smith refers to a 2011 Department of Tourism study, which highlights that participation by women in the corporate sector, especially black, women were lower than gazetted targets – with about 90% of enterprises not complying to the 10% black female shareholding. "We need to create greater gender parity in the sector or we won't realise the full benefits for our nation. Whilst men and women are equal we are different and to not benefit from the full and wider range of skills available is a wasted opportunity that will restrict the growth of any business."

Income generation opportunities

Smith believes that developing township tourism is a key enabler of this – and female entrepreneurs in this space should be celebrated. "The benefits to the local economy are significant. Creating employment and income generation opportunities in high unemployment areas is key. Township tourism delivers and keeps income in local businesses, rather than international conglomerates."

Khayelitsha entrepreneur and creator behind the food and lifestyle concept 4roomed eKasi Culture, Abigail Mbalo-Mokoena, agrees: "Township tourism has a huge role to play in boosting the economies of both South Africa and the wider continent. The rich history of our townships has to be better marketed – and the stories of female entrepreneurs need to be told."

4Roomed eKasi Culture is a lifestyle concept based on the four-roomed homes found in the oldest townships of South Africa. "It's an initiative that is intended to evoke the spirit of Ubuntu via nostalgic references to a time when multiple families shared a four-roomed house as one big union."

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For Mbalo-Mokoena, the primary goal is to encourage a dignified standard of life for the community by creating employment opportunities, growing business in the townships, encouraging corporate interest, and showcasing to South African and international tourists that townships have a compelling product to sell in the form of a unique experience.

"Exports are a key component of any flourishing economy. Tourism by its nature is an export product or service in the form of experiences; which tourists take with them and 'sell' to others," says Mbalo-Mokoena. "Township communities need to realise this and package themselves correctly because township tourism experiences have the potential to become the biggest 'export business' to both local and international markets."

Growing business in SA townships

Support from big business and government is another critical factor in making township tourism a success. According to Mbalo-Mokoena, government need to address the challenges faced by township tourism proprietors, such as crime, perceived crime communicated by less objective media, and the city's tourism structures. "Government need a focused growth strategy for township and rural tourism."

Smith adds that businesses in the cities have a role to play too. "They need to learn about and build relationships with township experiences. Moreover, they need to help government solve township and rural tourism challenges rather than only highlighting generalised perceived problems to local and international tourists."

When asked about women in leadership roles in the tourism sector, Mbalo-Mokoena says that self-belief issues need to be tackled via skills development and mentorship to grow the number of women role models in this sector. "The more women we have, the easier it will be to have networks, processes and systems that will pave the way to overcoming all the obstacles that women in tourism are faced with."

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