3 Nepali Sisters are Empowering Women through Adventure Tourism!

Nepal

Lucky Chhetri
Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

Based in Nepal, 3 Sisters Adventure Trekking (3 Sisters) was founded in 1994 to empower and employ rural women in adventure travel. Lucky Chhetri felt the impact of mountaineering training in her own life and wanted to share the feeling of strength and possibility with others. Responding to the gross inequality of women in Nepal, 3 Sisters founded a local NGO, Empowering Women of Nepal (EWN). Together, they offer unprecedented opportunities for women from poor, remote mountainous regions to become confident, self-sufficient, and successful through adventure tourism. So far, 600+ women have attended their women’s trekking guide training.

3 Sisters has revolutionized societal attitudes towards women and their work roles, gaining acceptance in their community and nationwide, and they have substantially contributed to women’s equality and education. Their newest initiative is women’s training in the poorest districts in west Nepal to enhance and conserve traditional culture while minimizing negative tourism impact.

Nepal’s only all-woman trekking agency, 3 Sisters provides a service run by women for women. This unique approach provides women travelers with the opportunity to connect with Nepali women, to travel free from male harassment, and to know that their program fees support the independence of Nepali women.
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We like to connect with women’s groups in other countries to explain how we work with women and exchange ideas. Sponsored by The Mountain organizations and offering training on cycling, rafting, wilderness first aid, etc. would increase our staff competencies and breadth of service.

Based on previous successful partnerships, such as ice-climbing with Magic Mountain Foundation Poland, networking with other adventure Connections with women’s groups / trekking clubs / travel agencies in other countries would attract more clients.

What types of partnerships or professional development would be most beneficial in spreading your innovation?

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What is the goal of your innovation?

Train and empower women through adventure tourism and guide sustainable tourism development in new areas.

How does your approach support or embody geotourism?

3 Sisters (and its non-profit EWN) utilizes the positive aspects of tourism to create equity for women in society and to bring revenue to the poorest areas of Nepal, while enhancing and protecting local environment and culture from the negative aspects of tourism.

Nepali women typically have less exposure and education than men and are typically excluded from tourism - one of Nepal’s top industries. Through our training, women become adventure professionals and acquire the skills to earn money, interact with the world, and discover their own strength - critically important in a culture where women have been consistently marginalized.

As tourism reaches into new areas, we are starting to work with communities to translate traditional food, culture, and lifestyle into attractive and sustainable tourism instead of perpetuating the uncontrolled growth which has characterized previous development in Nepal. We work with remote villages to help them become involved in tourism without losing their cultural identities or damaging the environment.

We are by women, for women. Out of Nepal’s 600+ trekking agencies, we are the only 100% woman-owned and operated agency. We are the only agency training and supplying woman guides to address the needs and interests of women travelers.

Describe your approach in detail. How is it innovative?

We empower women through adventure. Whether the women become trekking guides/staff or go on to do something else, they have acquired knowledge, confidence, and independent spirit.

We offer a 1-month training program covering leadership, health, English conversation, nutrition, environment conservation practices, national history, cultural practices, and sharing traditions from different areas to aid cultural conservation. Following the training program, we then offer a 5-month paid apprenticeship. We offer continuing education (most recently rock / ice climbing training) to give staff specialized skills to improve their tourism earning potential. The training is free, with food/lodging provided for women from remote areas.

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Describe the degree of success of your approach to date. Clearly define how you measure quantitative and qualitative impact in terms of how your approach contributes to the sustainability or enhancement of local culture, environment, heritage, or aesthetics? How does your approach minimize negative impacts? 200 words or less

In 8 years over 600 women trained, with 80+ women working directly as guides/staff at 3 Sisters and others working in a variety of tourism related jobs. Training classes are consistently filled and have waiting lists. We have become well-respected and known nationwide. Through our work, it has become acceptable for women to work in tourism. Our women earn USD 1200+ annually (compared to Nepali average $240) and use the money to pay for university, family medical expenses, siblings’ education, starting businesses. They show visible changes in confidence, independence and professional skills. When we educate women, we find we also educate their families and friends indirectly.

In remote west Nepal, we trained 100 women in food preparation, health, hygiene, and waste disposal resulting in clear, visible improvement in sanitation with communities organizing ongoing village cleanups. We will hire 80% of our trek staff locally in these areas. Through open communication, villages will grow extra food and cook for our groups, so that we can bring additional income to the area.

We partnered with a local NGO to collect antiques and create museum. We rescued 15 young girls from tourism child labor, providing them with food, lodging, scholarships.

And much more!

How does your program promote traveler enthusiasm, satisfaction, and engagement with the locale?

Rural women will be independent, self-supporting, confident community members; low-impact tourism complements/enhances traditional culture.

In one sentence describe what kind of impact, change, or reform your approach is intended to achieve.

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We create great rapport with travelers, always hiking together with our women staff and sharing the experience. Women from different cultures have a unique opportunity to get to know each other. Our staff are drawn from the local communities and can tell all about the culture and environment encountered along the way. Our clients repeatedly comment not just on their wonderful trek in the Himalayas, but also about getting to know their Nepali companions. Solo women travelers feel safe in the company of our women staff – no male harassment! All travelers get to experience culturally-preserved areas and traditional ways.

In what ways are local residents actively involved in your innovation, including participation and community input? How has the community responded to or benefited from your approach?

Initially, women in tourism were stigmatized as “loose”. Our business was criticized harshly. We searched for women to join training. Now communities are convinced by positive environment, good wages, insurance, child-care, regular training. Communities are supportive and parents feel comfortable allowing daughters to be in tourism, previously unacceptable. We are role models for community, showing that women can work in adventure tourism and can run successful businesses. Tourism communities are excited to collaborate. They take initiative - forming district tourism councils, building trails, etc. They request our input on new hotel associations, trek guidelines. Health/hygiene has improved

Describe how your innovation helps travelers and local residents better understand the value of the area’s cultural and natural heritage, and educates them on local environmental issues. How do you motivate them to act responsibly in their future travel decisions?

Our training educates residents about cultural/natural heritage, appropriate environmental practices. Conducted by Nepali women, training has been very effective generating change (better health/hygiene/education) while promoting positive traditions (food/clothing/housing). We give trekking clients “do’s and don'ts” list about local environment/culture, and show them authentic Nepali living.

Direct interaction between traveler and all staff (not just guide) gives both travelers and Nepalis wonderful opportunity to learn from each other. Client fees support women’s empowerment/environmental programs. We show clients how they support responsible tourism by signing up with us!

Sustainability

Is your initiative financially and organizationally sustainable? If not, what is required to make it so? What is the potential demand for your innovation?

Yes! Our trekking business is profitable and self-sustaining. Trekking guide trainings in the past were sometimes supported by national and international organizations, but now we can fund them through our own revenue generation. More and more women are applying for the training. New clients are growing and we have strong repeat business. We employ more women staff/guides every season, but there are still not enough female trekking guides to meet demand. We are training younger women in management to gradually take greater office responsibility. Tourists in Nepal reached all-time high in 2007, so we expect business to continue to increase!

How is your initiative currently financed? If available, provide information on your finances and organization that could help others.

Please list: Annual budget, annual revenue generated, size of part-time, full-time and volunteer staff.

Business revenue from our trekking groups and guesthouse employs women and fully funds our trekking guide training programs. Trekkers make donations because they are impressed and satisfied. Permanent staff (office/field): 24. Seasonal staff (field): 60+. Note: seasonal staff earn more in 3-4 months than many Nepalis earn in 1 year. 3 Sisters Adventure Trekking 2007 - Total income: US$68,826; total expenditure: US$55,987 (including donation to non-profit arm: US$9,756). Our non-profit arm gamers donations and grants to promote sustainable tourism initiative through free training for women in remote areas.

What is your plan to expand your approach? Please indicate where/how you would like to grow or enhance your innovation, or have others do so.

We want to build a Women’s Adventure Training Centre to train adventure professionals year-round and run empowerment courses for women. We can then run more courses, train more women, and provide regular advanced training (e.g., rock/ice climbing). We need to collaborate with national/international organizations for financial and technical support to make this reality. We want to encourage Nepali trekking agencies to employ trained women and operate treks in undeveloped, untouched rural areas to alleviate poverty. Beginning in the west, we will establish a model for positive geotourism with minimal negative impact that can be replicated elsewhere in Nepal.

What are the main barriers you encounter in managing, implementing, or replicating your innovation? What barriers keep your program from having greater impact?

We still do not have enough trained women trekking guides and demand is rising as our network expands. Lack of a training centre prevents us from expanding our training programs. It is difficult to find qualified and skilled permanent staff for the offices and training. Another challenge is that training woman trekking guides is a slow process as they need to overcome many internalized social limitations and learn how much they are really capable of. Women may take a long time to acquire necessary leadership skills after growing up in traditionally male-dominated culture where women are subservient to men. Most important is limitation of official recognition. Although many people working in the trekking industry in Nepal recognize that our training program is considerably better than the government-run program, the government does not give official recognition to our program, so a government trekking license cannot be issued to our graduates. This will become a serious problem should the government decide to enforce a policy of licensed guides only.

The Story

What is the origin of your innovation? Tell your story.

Trekking tourism is a huge industry in Nepal thanks to the Himalayas, but in the early 1990s women trekking guides were unheard of in a male dominated profession. Women worked hard behind the scenes, but control, ownership and money were in the men's hands. Women travelers came from all over the world, while women in Nepal could not even work openly in tourism because of the damage to their reputation. We started a guesthouse in Pokhara and heard women travelers complaining of harassment by male guides and porters. They requested us to guide them. As a trained mountaineer, I and my two sisters started 3 Sisters Adventure Trekking to provide a service run by women for women. However, there were not enough women guides to satisfy demand, because this was an unknown profession for women. Slowly women started asking us for jobs, but due to lack of education, knowledge and skills were not able to guide. Women from mountainous areas in west Nepal are especially disadvantaged due to extreme poverty, surviving in remote, harsh environments. These women are physically strong, used to working all day carrying heavy loads and earning nothing. We believed they can be excellent trekking guides, earning good money and learning at the same time. Training was needed
for these women to give them the necessary skills and knowledge to work as trekking guides. We founded a non-profit to continue this training and designed a curriculum to meet these requirements. Realizing that women needed to gain experience in the field, we introduced the new concept in Nepal of skills-based training. 3 Sisters provides a paid apprenticeship facility for the women to practice their new-found skills and gain confidence, while also earning money. The women attend as many training courses as necessary until they qualify as guides, allowing each woman to learn at her own pace.

Since starting, more than 600 women have attended our training programs. Some of these women now work for 3 Sisters, some work for other companies and others work in a variety of tourism related jobs. Many women have subsequently gone on to further education, supporting themselves working as trekking guides, while some women have started their own tourism related businesses. When the women first enter the program they often lack confidence, have had a poor education, speak little or no English and have no idea of the opportunities available to them. By the time they leave the program they have gained new-found self-confidence and can go on to become independent, self-supporting women.

We now organize rock and ice climbing training for our experienced trekking guides. The first ice-climbing training (winter 2007/2008) was run in collaboration with Magic Mountain Foundation from Poland. We were delighted when it was supported and filmed by National Geographic Traveler!

I believe that women can participate equally in all fields if given the opportunity to learn new skills. By creating a new profession for women in adventure trekking we are helping them do so. Read more at www.3sistersadventure.com.

Please provide a personal bio. Note this may be used in Changemakers' marketing material.

Working for an NGO (1986-87), I was assigned to work in western Nepal and was shocked to see how miserable and destitute the rural women’s lives were. I longed to do something to support them. Later I attended the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute’s program which changed my life. Running a guesthouse in Pokhara (1993-1994) with my sisters, solo women travelers complained of harassment from male guides and porters. Learning of my mountaineering training they asked me to guide them in the Himalayas. 3 Sisters Adventure Trekking was born, followed by Empowering Women of Nepal - I was finally helping rural women.

Please write an overview of your project. This text will appear when people scroll over the icon for your entry on the Google map located on the competition homepage.

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