How socio-economic conditions shape empowerment of indigenous women in El Alto's tourism sector

Cómo las condiciones socioeconómicas moldean elempoderamiento de mujeres indígenas en el sector turístico de El Alto

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Abstract: This article examines the role of socio-economic conditions in shaping empowerment, based on an ethnographic study conducted in 2022–2023 with three groups of indigenous women working in the tourism sector in El Alto, Bolivia: *Cholitas Escaladoras, Cholitas Luchadoras*, and female guides. The study shows that socio-economic structures contribute to both empowerment and disempowerment. In the context of El Alto, social capital, including family networks and associations, and labour relations emerge as key factors. Horizontal labour relations, which foster collaboration and shared decision-making, are associated with greater economic, social, and political empowerment, while vertical structures tend to limit agency and create dependency. These findings underscore the importance of considering contextual socio-economic conditions when analysing empowerment, offering a holistic understanding of how it manifests across different groups.

Keywords: Empowerment, Indigenous women, Tourism, Socio-economic conditions, Social capital, Labour relations.

Resumen: Este artículo examina el papel de las condiciones socioeconómicas en la configuración del empoderamiento, a partir de un estudio etnográfico realizado entre 2022 y 2023 con tres grupos de mujeres indígenas que trabajan en el sector turístico de El Alto, Bolivia: las Cholitas Escaladoras, las Cholitas Luchadoras y las guías indígenas. El estudio muestra que las estructuras socioeconómicas contribuyen tanto al empoderamiento como al des-empoderamiento. En el contexto de El Alto, el capital social, que incluye las redes familiares y las asociaciones, y las relaciones laborales emergen como factores clave. Las relaciones laborales horizontales, que fomentan la colaboración y la toma de decisiones compartida, se asocian con un mayor empoderamiento económico, social y político, mientras que las estructuras verticales tienden a limitar la agencia y generar dependencia. Estos hallazgos subrayan la importancia de considerar las condiciones socioeconómicas contextuales al analizar el empoderamiento, ofreciendo una comprensión holística de cómo se manifiesta entre distintos grupos.

Palabras clave: Empoderamiento, Mujeres indígenas, Turismo, Condiciones socioeconómicas, Capital social, Relaciones laborales

1. Introduction

The role of tourism in women's empowerment is widely discussed. Organizations such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) highlight that tourism can provide important pathways to female empowerment [1]. Previous studies also have highlighted some of the ways in which indigenous women specifically can benefit from working in the tourism sector. For example, Little found that Mayan women

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in Guatemala, recognized as authentic cultural representatives through their traditional dress and language, benefit economically from tourism as visitors seek authentic experiences [2]. Similarly, Zorn showed that on Taquile Island, Peru, women's role in textile production and sales not only reinforced their cultural significance but also influenced gender dynamics [3]. The income they earned enabled them to travel, engage in public affairs, and pursue education, reshaping their social roles [3]. Building on these studies, my research on tourism in El Alto, Bolivia, confirms that participation in tourism can provide significant benefits for indigenous women. These benefits can contribute to empowerment, though only at certain levels, across specific dimensions, and under particular conditions. The ways in which socioeconomic conditions shape empowerment within specific groups remain relatively underexplored. Therefore, the aim of this article is to demonstrate the crucial role of contextual factors in the study of empowerment. Specifically, I focus on three groups of indigenous women in El Alto, whose participation in tourism activities illustrates how labour structures, family networks, and associations influence empowerment. By examining these conditions, the study offers a holistic understanding, offering deeper insight into which elements are most relevant in a given context. This approach also helps explain why empowerment may emerge in one setting but not in another, which is essential for understanding how tourism shapes the empowerment of indigenous women within a specific socio-economic context.

The analysis draws on the dimensions and contextual factors outlined in Scheyvens and van der Watt's framework, which is specifically developed for analysing empowerment in tourism [4]. When discussing these dimensions, I refer to the economic, political, social, psychological, cultural, and environmental dimensions. The framework also highlights contextual factors, like social capital, customary practices, access to markets and credit, business training, and associations, that can enable or constrain empowerment [4].

Among these contextual factors, social capital is particularly significant. In a report by the World Bank, Grootaert discusses that social capital is an essential component of economic development, complementing traditional capital by underscoring the importance of social networks [5]. These networks enable economic actors to share information, coordinate actions, and engage in collective decision-making, ultimately supporting co-operation and joint initiatives [5]. In El Alto social capital is reflected in both the strong role of family networks in labour organization and the presence of civic organizations, such as associations [6]. These family networks are also related to horizontal labour relations. These relations, characterized by autonomy and participatory decision-making, tend to have a

more positive impact on economic and political empowerment compared to vertical labour structures. The associations are essential for the three groups studied, as they not only reflect a degree of existing political empowerment but also serve as a foundation for further economic and political empowerment.

The data presented in this article stems from my ethnographic research conducted between 2022 and 2023, focused on three groups of Indigenous women in El Alto involved in tourism: *Cholitas Escaladoras*, *Cholitas Luchadoras*, and female tour guides. The *Cholitas Escaladoras* are a group of indigenous women who work as assistant mountain guides and have gained international attention for two key reasons. First, they wear the *pollera*, a traditional skirt symbolizing their indigenous identity, while working in the mountains. Second, they challenge social norms by entering the field of mountaineering, a sport historically dominated by men and associated with the elite class [7]. Through their work, they not only break gender and socioeconomic barriers, but also redefine the role of indigenous women in high-altitude sports. Wearing the *pollera* while working in nontraditional positions in tourism contributes to their economic, cultural, and psychological empowerment, as discussed below. However, broader contextual factors, such as the socioeconomic structure of El Alto, also play a crucial role. The second group, Las *Cholitas Luchadoras*, consists of indigenous women who wear the *pollera* while participating in Bolivian *Lucha Libre,* a wrestling style that originated in Mexico. Like the *Cholitas Escaladoras*, they have entered a sport that was traditionally dominated by men. As a result, these women have also gained international recognition for breaking both gender and ethnic barriers. However, the findings reveal a key distinction exists between the two groups: the difference between vertical and horizontal labour relations. This distinction is significant for understanding how empowerment unfolds. The third and final group consists of female city tour guides. While these women do not wear the traditional *pollera*, they identify as indigenous and showcase various cultural aspects of El Alto during the city tours. This group is particularly significant because various guides belong to an association, highlighting the importance of collective organization in the context of El Alto**.** Their case exemplifies how such structures relate to empowerment.

This article is structured as follows. First, the methodology is presented, outlining the qualitative research design, case selection, and data collection techniques used to study three groups of indigenous women in El Alto, Bolivia. Next, the theoretical framework is introduced, discussing empowerment and its key dimensions, and situating it within broader debates on gender, ethnic, and territorial inequalities. These discussions are also connected to the literature on tourism as a potential

pathway for empowerment. Following this, the social and economic structure of El Alto is described to provide contextual background. The three groups under study are then presented, highlighting how socio-economic structures influence their empowerment. Finally, the dynamics across the groups are analysed to show how labour structures, family networks, and associations shape empowerment in different ways, underscoring that empowerment is a context-dependent process rather than a uniform outcome of participation in tourism.

2. Methodology

This study drew on ethnographic methods, which were well suited to its aim of understanding empowerment as experienced and interpreted by indigenous women working in tourism. The three groups were selected for their relevance in El Alto's tourism sector, as well as for their shared contextual factors, such as living in the city of El Alto. At the same time, they differ in important ways, for example, whether they wear the *pollera* during their work, as well as other socio-economic characteristics, providing an interesting foundation for comparative analysis and a deeper understanding of empowerment.

The study included three groups of indigenous women working in tourism in El Alto. The *Cholitas Luchadoras* group comprised six active members of *Luchadores Independientes de Extremo Riesgo (LIDER)*, the only wrestling group active in tourism during fieldwork. Additional data were collected from their trainer and the partnering tour operator. *The Cholitas Escaladoras* group included six active members of the *Cholitas Climbing Bolivia Association*; although other independent *Escaladoras* work in tourism, the study focuses on association members, the original core of the group founded after a development project. Further input was obtained from their husbands/certified guides and the project coordinator. The female guides group consisted of two independent guides and members of the mixed-gender *Asociación de Guías Emprendedores en Turismo El Alto (Aguietur EA)*, which promotes better labour conditions and tourism in El Alto. This allowed for comparison between independent and organized work.

Data were collected through participant observation, 35 semi-structured interviews, and multiple informal conversations, complemented by the review of contextual documents such as laws, municipal tourism plans, promotional materials, and media representations. This combination provided both emic perspectives and an understanding of how these women's work is framed in the public sphere. Triangulation across sources, participants, and techniques strengthened the validity of the findings. Interviews and field notes were thematically coded and analysed through Scheyvens & van der Watt's em-

powerment framework, focusing on economic, cultural, political, social, and psychological dimensions, while also attending to contextual factors such as social capital and labour relations. This approach ensured a holistic understanding of how empowerment is shaped within El Alto's tourism sector.

Empowerment, Territorial, Ethnic and Gender Inequality and its Relationship with Tourism

Empowerment is a widely used term by development agencies, governments, and in discussions on tourism and sustainable development [4]. However, like many concepts in social science, empowerment remains contested, with multiple definitions. It is commonly associated with ideas such as agency, autonomy, participation, self-mobilization, and self-confidence [8], [9]. The concept of 'power' is also central to discussions on empowerment. Traditionally, power has been understood in terms of domination. However, Scheyvens and van der Watt argue that within the framework of sustainable development, power should not be equated with domination but rather seen as an enabling, liberating, and productive force, for instance, *power from within* (such as self-confidence) [4]. Consequently, they define empowerment as: '*the activation of the confidence and capabilities of previously disadvantaged or disenfranchised individuals or groups so that they can exert greater control over their lives, challenge unequal power relations, mobilize resources to meet their needs, and work to achieve social justice*' [4]. In this article I base my analysis on their definition and framework, due to its specific focus on empowerment within the tourism sector and its connection to sustainable development.

Since the late 1990s, scholars have developed various frameworks to analyse empowerment. Scheyvens introduced a framework tailored specifically to the tourism industry, identifying four key dimensions: economic, psychological, social, and political empowerment [10]. More recently, Scheyvens and van der Watt expanded this framework by integrating principles of sustainable development, aligning it with its three core pillars: environment, economy, and society [4]. Consequently, in their revised model, they incorporated two additional dimensions; cultural and environmental, and identified seven key contextual factors that can either enable (or disable) empowerment: social capital, customary practices, access to markets and credit, business training and linkages, governance, law and policy, and politics. I argue that contextual factors are essential for analysing empowerment. However, not all factors identified by the authors are equally relevant in every context, and additional factors may also influence empowerment depending on the specific socio-cultural and economic setting. In the context of El Alto, social capital and customary practices are particularly relevant, while access to markets, credit, and business training also play a role, yet to a lesser extent.

When analysing social capital, it becomes clear that, like many other concepts in social science, it is highly contested. However, its central argument remains that social networks hold value [11]. Putnam distinguishes between two key forms: bonding social capital, which refers to the ties within a community that reinforce group cohesion, and bridging social capital, which connects different social groups and facilitates broader cooperation [11].

Furthermore, as noted in the introduction, in the report by the World Bank, Grootaert emphasizes that social capital has increasingly been recognized as a crucial factor in economic development, complementing traditional forms of capital by highlighting the role of social networks in facilitating cooperation and collective action [5]. In this context, economic actors play a key role in forming networks that foster information exchange, coordinate activities, and support collective decision-making. As will be further elaborated in the contextual analysis of El Alto, the concept of social capital has also gained relevance in discussions surrounding the informal/ popular economy [12].

The analysis of social capital can also include both vertical and horizontal associations. According to the previous mentioned World Bank report vertical associations are defined by hierarchical structures and an unequal distribution of power among members, which can limit collective participation and benefits. In contrast, horizontal associations, where power is distributed more equitably, are generally more effective in fostering social capital. Because members share decision-making responsibilities and have a greater likelihood of receiving a fair share of the benefits, they are more inclined to actively contribute and engage in collective initiatives [5]. As will be further elaborated, the findings of my study suggest that in this specific context, social capital, particularly in the form of family businesses, is linked to horizontal labour relations. These, in turn, contribute to economic, political, and social empowerment by fostering more participatory environments.

In their framework, Scheyvens and van der Watt argue that social capital can serve as a favourable condition for securing employment in the tourism sector or accessing informal knowledge [4]. While my data confirms this, I argue that in the context of El Alto, social capital has a broader relevance, particularly in relation to family-based businesses and associations, as I will elaborate on later.

The authors conceptualize customary practices as social norms and traditions that can either enable or hinder empowerment. In El Alto, the context of this research, social networks are deeply embedded in everyday life and operate as a customary practice. Given this embeddedness, in this study, social capital and customary practices are examined jointly, even though the authors treat them as distinct contextual factors.

Finally, for individuals seeking to establish their own tourism business, access to credit, training, and markets are crucial factors [4]. In this study, all three groups are self-employed within the tourism sector. Their ability to access markets, which is related to the existing labour relations, as well as the training they have received, forms a foundation for their empowerment.

As stated before, Scheyvens and Van der Watt's framework encompasses six dimensions of empowerment: economic, cultural, political, social, psychological, and environmental. While the cultural and psychological dimensions are briefly addressed, this article primarily focuses on the economic, political, and social dimensions, as these are most influenced by the specific contextual factors of El Alto and represent the most significant and innovative contributions of this research.

According to the authors the economic dimension refers to the attainment of sustainable income and the ability of disadvantaged groups to establish their own tourism businesses and/or access capital. On the other hand, economic disempowerment can occur when, for example, income distribution is unequal [4]. However, according to Cole, income generation alone is not sufficient for assessing economic empowerment [13]. I agree with this perspective, as the data from my study also demonstrate that other factors such as income satisfaction and the gender wage gap are important in evaluating economic empowerment. The gender wage gap highlights the disparity in earnings between men and women, with men receiving higher average wages even when they have the same level of education, experience, and type of occupation. Interestingly, this wage gap is not observed within the groups studied. This relationship will be further explained in relation to their possible economic empowerment.

In the proposed framework, social empowerment refers to the tourism sector's potential to foster social cohesion and strengthen social capital. Conversely, social disempowerment can arise when envy and competition undermine community cohesion. Political empowerment, on the other hand, is linked to stakeholders' participation in decision-making processes regarding tourism in their area, including control over income distribution. Political disempowerment occurs when leadership structures exclude other individuals from these processes [4]. Both social and political empowerment and disempowerment are present within the groups studied.

The cultural dimension relates to the strengthening of ethnic identity and pride, fostered by tourists' interest in and respect for the communities they visit. Equally important is the abil-

ity of Indigenous communities and other ethnic groups to self-represent their culture. Psychological empowerment, the second most reported form of empowerment after economic empowerment, involves, an increased sense of self-esteem and (ethnic) pride, stemming from interactions with tourists, higher income, or external cultural appreciation [4,13].

The dimensions of cultural and psychological empowerment play a significant role in discussions on empowerment. My findings support previous research indicating that employment in tourism can foster a sense of ethnic pride, thereby contributing to both dimensions [13,14]. However, since these aspects have already been widely addressed in the literature, they are not the central focus of this article.

To finish; it is important to note that there is no one-size-fits-all recipe for empowerment; what empowers one person may not empower another [13]. As argued in this article, this is related to the contextual factors. Moreover, while the different dimensions of empowerment are interconnected, being empowered in one dimension does not automatically translate to empowerment in another dimension.

Studying the potential empowerment of the three groups of Indigenous women in El Alto working in tourism is important, as they navigate the intersecting challenges of territorial, gender, and ethnic inequalities.

Territory is a fundamental axis of inequality, as one's place of birth or residence both shapes and reflects socioeconomic opportunities and conditions [14,15]. Territorial inequality manifests on multiple scales; globally, between countries, and locally, within regions, nations, and cities [16]. Access to essential social goods, such as employment and healthcare, can vary significantly between various regions. In this study, the focus is specifically on the territorial inequality between two neighbouring cities: El Alto and La Paz. An important factor related to territorial inequality is territorial stigma. On one hand, these stigmas contribute to the disadvantaged position of residents, and on the other, they reinforce existing power relations and social inequalities [15]. These stigmas are linked to the labour discrimination experienced by the studied groups.

In El Alto, territorial inequality is, among others, related to ethnicity, as it identifies as an indigenous city. As highlighted in the Comisión Económica de América Latina y el Caribe (Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean, CEPAL) report, territory is precisely where multiple axes of inequality are reflected and interwoven [16].

In the Bolivian context, the indigenous population has historically occupied a marginalized and subordinate position. Furthermore, indigenous women occupied the lowest position in the hierarchy of social stratification [18].

As De la Cadena states, based on her study in Chitapampa, Peru, 'women are more Indian' than men [19]. The author describes that in Chitapampa, the inhabitants identify as Indians, mestizos, or those in between. Economic stratification is central to this classification of ethnicity, and within this classification, 'women remain more Indian'.

Women are not only considered more Indian due to economic stratification, but also because ethnic differences are more apparent in, for example, their clothing and language [20]. Clothing plays a key role in this research, as two groups in the study express their indigeneity through the *pollera*. To this day, *pollera*-wearing women are commonly associated with market activities and occupations linked to cooking and domestic labour [21]**.** However, a growing number of these women are challenging traditional gender roles by entering male-dominated professions, such as construction work [22]. While this shift signals progress, my research reveals that occupational segregation remains prevalent. Many participants, despite working in tourism, continue to engage in roles traditionally associated with *pollera*-wearing women, such as market vending or food preparation.

However, the tourism sector presents a uniquely compelling opportunity for these women, as they form an important tourist attraction. An example is the depiction of women wearing the *pollera* on tourist postcards. These women symbolize the indigenous and authentic[1] Bolivia that many tourists seek to experience [23]. In this context, Babb challenges De la Cadena's perspective, suggesting that in the tourism industry, 'being more Indian' is not necessarily 'inferior' [24]. Instead, women can use this identity as a source of cultural and economic capital. As Babb notes, embracing an indigenous identity for tourism can serve as a form of empowerment [24]. Similarly, Canessa emphasizes that tourism offers potential to challenge the colonial gender model and create new platforms where women's contributions are publicly acknowledged and valued [25]. While I agree with this perspective, I believe it should be studied holistically, with a nuanced approach that considers the complex dynamics at play.

3. The socioeconomic structure in the city of El Alto

El Alto is Bolivia's second most populous city and before officially recognized as an independent city, El Alto served as an

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1 The term 'authentic' in this context is not employed as an analytical or theoretical concept, but rather to describe tourist perceptions and marketing representations.

indigenous periphery of the neighbouring city of La Paz [6]. To this day, it continues to be identified as an indigenous city and remains deeply interconnected with La Paz in economic, social, and infrastructural terms. However, territorial inequality exists between the two cities, for example in employment opportunities. Many jobs, including in the tourism sector, are concentrated in La Paz. Informants in this study reported experiencing labour market exclusion in La Paz, often due to negative stereotypes associated with residents of El Alto. For instance, Carlos, coordinator of the *Asociación de Guías* in El Alto, described how local companies and some guides discriminated against them, saying, *'del Alto son, tendrán preparación académica insuficiente'* (they are from El Alto, they will have insufficient academic preparation).

In this socio-economic context, many groups in El Alto, have developed their own economic opportunities, often characterized by informality. According to the *Centro de Estudio para el Desarrollo Laboral y Agrario* (Center for the Study of Labor and Agrarian Development, CEDLA), El Alto has the highest rate of informal employment in Bolivia, with 72.2 per cent of the working population engaged in informal labour. Notably, women constitute 80.5 per cent of this percentage. The manufacturing and commercial sectors are the primary sources of employment, with many residents, particularly women, engaged in self-employment or family-based businesses [26]. Likewise, the women in tourism who participated in this study are self-employed, with the *Cholitas Escaladoras* notably involved in family-based enterprises, operating within the so-called popular economy.

The popular economy has been framed within broader debates on the informal economy. These debates originated in the early 1970s, following publications by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and Hart, which examined self-employment in urban popular sectors in so-called 'developing' countries. The ILO described the urban informal economy as small-scale economic activities that lack governmental recognition (which for example restricts access to government aid of subsidies and other services) [27]. Hart distinguished the formal economy from the informal economy by differentiating wage labour from self-employment [28]. These publications, along with several others between the 1970s and 1990s, analysed the formal and informal economy in a dual manner. Subsequently, criticisms arose regarding this binary way of thinking, arguing that the informal and formal sectors are interconnected and interdependent [24]. Likewise, it has been identified that the informal sector is highly heterogeneous and contextual. In this regard, numerous ethnographic and sociological studies have examined specific economic activities comprising what is known as the popular economy. This sector encompasses a diverse array

of practices involved in the production, consumption, and reproduction of goods and services, which often diverge from the dominant economic structures of contemporary capitalism [29]. These studies emphasize that people participating in the popular economy respond to and negotiate with established exclusionary capitalist structures. For instance, research conducted by Tassi et al. on popular merchants highlighted how these individuals, who initially experienced exclusion, have managed to create economic spaces based on their own institutional frameworks, such as family and social networks [12]. However, they also remain connected to the dominant economic structures. While this study focuses on women working in tourism rather than merchants, they similarly navigate economic spaces shaped by their own institutional frameworks. For example, institutional structures like associations are vital for all the groups studied, as they play a key role in shaping their economic opportunities and empowerment. These associations have deep roots in rural community structures, with migrants bringing collective organizational forms, such as peasant unions, to El Alto. Upon settling in the city, they maintained this tradition by forming neighbourhood councils to demand basic services. Today, a significant portion of El Alto's informal workforce is affiliated with unions or associations [6].

When examining the informal economy in relation to gender, it becomes evident that women are globally overrepresented in this sector compared to men. In low- and middle-income countries, informal employment constitutes 67 per cent of female labour, whereas it accounts for only 60 per cent of male labour [30]. As stated before, in El Alto, women constitute 80.5 per cent of the 72.2 percent of the working population engaged in the informal economy [26]. A key factor is motivating women to engage in this type of economic activity its accessibility, as for example it does not require a certain formal education [31]. Another significant reason is the flexibility it offers, allowing women to balance work with childcare responsibilities [32]. However, in the tourism-related jobs examined in this study, while informal, this flexibility is limited. Consequently, in the specific context of this research, the second reason for women's participation in the informal sector is not applicable.

The women in this study who work in tourism operate within these preexisting economic structures. Understanding this socio-economic context is essential to analysing how empowerment unfolds within specific conditions.

4. Indigenous women from El Alto in tourism: the socio-economic context and empowerment

This section examines how the participation of the *Cholitas Escaladoras*, *Cholitas Luchadoras*, and female guides in tour-

ism connects to El Alto's socio-economic structures and how this shapes their empowerment. In this context, it is important to note that all three groups are self-employed, but in different ways: the *Escaladoras* operate family-run businesses, the guides work freelance, and the *Luchadoras* are paid per performance, mainly through the La Paz-based agency Andean Secrets.

Accessing the Tourism Industry
Social capital played a key role in the initial engagement of both the *Luchadoras* and *Escaladoras*, though in different ways. Various *Luchadoras* explained that they became involved in lucha libre through family members or neighbours already active in the sport, gaining entry long before it became a tourist attraction. Many *Escaladoras*, by contrast, had been connected to the tourism industry from a young age through family and community networks. For example, three sisters from the studied group, born in Chucura, a community located along the Inca Trail (or Choro Trek), reported that they and other family members worked as porters from an early age, which allowed them to acquire experience and skills in trekking and mountaineering. These patterns illustrate Scheyvens and van der Watt's argument that social capital functions as an enabling factor, creating pathways for potential empowerment by facilitating access to the tourism sector.

For the *Luchadoras*, entry into tourism was facilitated by an external actor, the Andean Secrets travel agency. According to the owner, she recognized the potential of lucha libre performed by women wearing the *pollera* as a tourist attraction. This proved successful and, in turn, transformed the women's status within the sport: what had previously been dismissed as a joke gained legitimacy and prestige through international recognition. Such recognition fostered both cultural empowerment, by strengthening pride in their indigenous identity, and psychological empowerment, by enhancing self-confidence and social validation.

At the same time, the involvement of the agency, while providing market access, also created dependency and limited their participation in decision-making, reflecting a more vertical labour structure. Within Scheyvens & van der Watt's framework, this case illustrates how an enabling factor, market access, can simultaneously constrain empowerment when embedded in vertical structures that limit political agency.

By contrast, the guides followed a largely self-driven path, pursuing formal tourism or language studies, with associations providing access to professional opportunities. Taken together, the three cases show that social networks, whether grounded in family, community, or associations, play a crucial role, underscoring the foundational importance of social capital in

shaping pathways into tourism. While the types of social networks and initial entry points differ across groups, associations further demonstrate how collective organization can create enabling conditions that support broader economic, social, and political empowerment.

Civic Associations
As previously mentioned, social capital plays a crucial role not only in accessing the tourism sector but also more broadly within El Alto's socio-economic context. A key aspect of this is the presence of associations, which are central to the city's civic organization [6]. While their significance varies among the three groups studied, they are related to the economic, political, and social empowerment. In general, this study argues that associations, as a form of social capital, create favourable conditions by facilitating collective action aimed at improving the labour position of their members.

The city guides studied include members of the *Asociación de Guías Emprendedores en Turismo* de la ciudad de El Alto (Aguietur EA)**,** an association founded by tourism graduates to address the difficulties its members face in securing employment. Guides from El Alto often experience territorial discrimination, being excluded from jobs in the tourism sector in La Paz due to a widespread perception that they are poorly educated, despite most holding university degrees. Even when guides manage to obtain work, they frequently face low wages and long hours**,** reflecting broader structural inequalities in the tourism labour market.

The coordinator of the association highlighted that it mitigates these challenges by providing accreditation through the *Federación Boliviana de Guías de Turismo* (FEBOGUIT)**,** which improves recognition, pay, and employment prospects, contributing to economic empowerment. It also advocates for fair labour conditions, offers professional development, and creates a platform for collective action, reinforcing political and social empowerment**.** Connections between members and the association's coordinator, who also runs a tourism agency in La Paz, create two types of supportive networks: bonding capital**,** which strengthens ties and mutual support among members, and bridging capital, which links them to external contacts and opportunities. These networks help guides secure work and maintain professional connections. In this way, Aguietur EA functions as an enabling socio-economic structure**,** altering the conditions under which empowerment is possible. By providing recognition, resources, and networks, it directly produces economic, social, and political empowerment, transforming guides' position within a discriminatory and exploitative labour market.

The *Cholitas Escaladoras* who participated in this study are members of two associations: the Asociación de Andinismo de Promotores en Turismo, Aventura y Montaña (AAPTAM) and the all-female Asociación Cholitas Escaladoras Climbing Bolivia**.** To understand their labour context, it is essential to situate them within the broader mountaineering landscape in Bolivia. A key institution is the Asociación de Guías de Montaña y Trekking de Bolivia (AGMTB)**,** the national representative of the International Federation of Mountain Guide Associations (IFMGA), which provides training and certification for high-mountain guides. However, the full certification process is expensive, requiring approximately USD 10,000 in tuition and fees, creating an elitist field that is largely inaccessible to guides from El Alto and rural communities.

In response to these barriers, a group of guides from rural communities who had migrated to El Alto or La Paz established AAPTAM, offering national training at lower cost to its members. For instance, Pablo, a certified guide, husband of Rosa (an *Escaladora*), and member of AAPTAM, emphasized the financial challenge for many: *"¿Te imaginas a alguien de El Alto o de la provincia poder pagar un monto así?"* (Can you imagine someone from El Alto or the provinces being able to pay such an amount?). These guides also accessed the mountaineering market by offering competitive rates and taking on multiple roles simultaneously. By creating AAPTAM as an alternative to the elitist AGMTB, these guides demonstrate how associations can generate enabling socio-economic spaces, expanding the conditions under which empowerment is possible. While the *Cholitas Escaladoras* themselves have not participated in the national training, the economic space created by AAPTAM provides a foundation for their involvement in mountaineering, which in turn functions as an enabling factor for their broader empowerment.

The 'Asociación Cholitas Escaladoras Climbing Bolivia' was established after the women received their initial training, as will be elaborated in the next section. This association primarily serves an organizational function, facilitating collaboration among its members and coordinating logistical matters such as assigning guides for each tour. Within this structure, social empowerment is fostered through mutual support, shared responsibilities, and strengthened professional ties.

The experience of the *Cholitas Luchadoras* presents a contrast. They once had an association, but labour-related conflicts related to envy between the *Luchadoras* led to its dissolution. Scheyvens and van der Watt highlight how jealousy can erode social cohesion, ultimately resulting in social disempowerment [10]. Furthermore, according to the *Luchadoras*, being part of an association, a collective, provided them with greater leverage

to advocate for their rights, including demands for fairer wages, as also explained in the other case studies. The dissolution of the association not only weakened their bargaining power but also further limited their ability to influence decisions, ultimately contributing to their political disempowerment. This demonstrates how in this case social disempowerment is deeply interconnected with political empowerment, as the lack of collective organization diminished their ability to participate in decision-making processes, and economic empowerment, as will be further discussed.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate that associations in El Alto are crucial socio-economic structures that can act as enabling factors, shaping the conditions under which empowerment is possible. They provide organization, collective support, and networks that foster economic, social, and political empowerment, while their absence can leave groups vulnerable, limiting empowerment.

Training, Financial Support and Market Access
In the case of the *Cholitas Escaladoras*, a combination of enabling factors contributed to their empowerment. Many had previously worked in supporting roles as porters or cooks, and several are married to guides holding national certifications. Their transition into more prominent roles in mountaineering was facilitated by access to training and financial support, particularly through the NGO Centro de Estudios y Cooperación Internacional (CECI)**.** The project coordinator explained that this organization provided both funding and entry into the Initial Training course, enabling the *Escaladoras* to develop technical skills and take on more visible guiding roles. As described by Scheyvens and van der Watt, such access to training constitutes an enabling condition, allowing groups to expand their professional opportunities.

It is important to note, however, that their certification qualifies them only for assisting guiding roles; they are not authorized to work independently as high-mountain guides and must operate alongside a certified guide, often their husband, when navigating high-altitude environments. For less technical treks, they are permitted to guide independently.

The decision not to pursue full national certification is also influenced by customary patriarchal practices, which often assume that women will step away from mountaineering after having children. Despite these constraints, the *Escaladoras* have established a strong market position as assistant guides, making full certification less essential for their professional success. Their current roles already contribute to economic, cultural, and psychological empowerment, which will be discussed in more detail later, even if these customary practices remain un-

favourable for certain dimensions of gender equality.

Access to financing through bank loans was also significant for the *Escaladoras* group, enabling them to invest in essential resources such as mountaineering equipment and even vehicles to transport tourists. This aligns with Tassi et al., who highlight that actors working in the popular economy in El Alto have access to bank loans [12], demonstrating that financial support can be a favourable condition in order to participate in a certain economic activity.

When it comes to market access, the *Escaladoras*, in contrast to the *Luchadoras*, are not dependent on an intermediary agency. Like the city guides, they collaborate with various travel agencies. However, some have also taken the initiative to establish their own travel agency, yet most attract most of their clients through social media. Due to their international popularity, tourists actively seek them, either through travel agencies or social media. In other words, as I will explain further on, their visibility and the way they have redefined social norms for indigenous women have granted them direct market access, an important enabling factor. In other words, the *Cholitas Escaladoras* connect with clients directly, reducing their reliance on third parties and strengthening their economic autonomy, which serves as a foundation for their economic empowerment. Together, these enabling factors allow the *Escaladoras* to expand their professional roles, which is a basis for further empowerment.

Family Business and Labour Relations
Family networks, an important form of social capital, are deeply embedded in El Alto's economic structures. Notably, only the *Escaladoras* have organized their own businesses in collaboration with their families. For example, they run tours as a family unit: the husband, as the certified guide, leads the expedition together with the *Escaladora*, while their son drives the vehicle they acquired specifically for transporting tourists. This family-based organization plays a crucial role in their empowerment, fostering collaboration and shared responsibility.

Closely linked to family networks is the impact of labour relations on empowerment. Vertical labour relations are evident in the case of the *Luchadoras*, where hierarchical interactions define their work structure. Within *lucha libre* itself, more experienced *Cholitas Luchadoras* enjoy greater autonomy, particularly in shaping their performances, while younger *Luchadoras* must follow the trainer's instructions. Integration into tourism further reinforces these hierarchies, as the external agency Andean Secrets controls much of the organization and promotion, reflecting a top-down flow of power.

In contrast, the *Escaladoras* demonstrate a more horizontal labour dynamic within their family-based organization. Here, relationships are collaborative rather than hierarchical, with each family member assigned specific roles and responsibilities. This model fosters a more equitable distribution of tasks and decision-making, emphasizing cooperation over top-down structures. The comparison between the *Luchadoras* and *Escaladoras* demonstrates that horizontal labour relations are more conducive to empowerment, particularly when examining satisfaction with income and decision-making power.

When analysing their income, it is essential to consider the role of indigenous women in tourism. Both the *Cholitas Luchadoras* and the *Cholitas Escaladoras* are also 'more indigenous' than men in tourism, as the male wrestlers and male guides do not wear clothes that represent indigeneity, but outfits that are more closely related to Mexican wrestling or regular mountaineering gear. As stated before, the fact that these women represent indigenousness through their clothing and redefine social roles for these women, made both groups internationally popular and an important tourist attraction. Which is also reflected in their income, as the *Luchadoras* earn a higher wage than their male counterparts, as they are the main tourist attraction. The *Escaladoras* earn the same as their husbands, who hold national guide certifications. Although their husbands occupy a higher position in the professional hierarchy, the *Escaladoras* still benefit from a relative wage advantage, similar to the *Luchadoras*. This is not an insignificant factor, especially considering the typical gender wage gap; in this case, the gap works in favour of the women, with tourism being a key driver of this dynamic.

However, this wage advantage counterparts may seem highly favourable for their economic empowerment. However, the situation is more complex. While they may earn more than their male colleagues, most of the *Luchadoras* are not satisfied with this income, as they perceive an unequal income disparity when compared to the business owners and organizers, which they see as unfair. As Ana, one of the Luchadoras, explained: "*No me sirve para nada, nosotras no ganamos nada, estamos aquí solamente para el show; los que ganan son los empresarios*" ("It's useless for me; we earn nothing, we're only here for the show; the ones who make money are the organizers"). This reflects a vertical hierarchy, where they have limited control over financial decisions.

At first glance, their situation may seem comparable to that of the *Escaladoras*. However, a key distinction is that most *Escaladoras* report being satisfied with their earnings. This difference can be attributed to the nature of labour relations as well as the level of participation in decision-making regarding income distribution. Unlike the *Luchadoras*, the *Escaladoras* operate

within a more equitable structure, where financial decisions are made collectively within their families rather than dictated by external organizers. This illustrates how economic empowerment also depends on the relational structures through which income is generated and distributed.

Overall, these cases illustrate that family networks support the development of more horizontal labour relations, which in turn foster greater satisfaction with income and contribute to the *Escaladoras*' economic empowerment, highlighting how organizational structure and collaborative decision-making are key conditions for empowerment in El Alto.

Cultural and psychological dimensions
Although this article emphasizes economic, political, and social empowerment, the framework also highlights cultural and psychological dimensions, which remain essential for understanding indigenous women's experiences in El Alto tourism. For the *Escaladoras* and *Luchadoras*, public recognition for showcasing their indigenous culture and occupying new social roles fosters cultural pride and psychological confidence. Similarly, female guides in El Alto, who identify as indigenous despite not wearing the *pollera*, emphasize the pride derived from sharing their city and Aymara culture with visitors, challenging territorial and ethnic stigmas. In this way, tourism can serve as a platform for cultural recognition and the strengthening of ethnic and territorial identity.

5. Conclusion

Overall, and consistent with previous research, I acknowledge that employment in tourism can offer certain benefits to indigenous women [25], [2]. My findings also indicate that working in tourism can contribute to empowerment, particularly in the cultural and psychological dimensions, evident across all three groups. These forms of empowerment are closely tied to the central role indigenous women play in commodifying their culture for touristic purposes.

When examining the economic, political and social dimensions, the situation becomes more complex and is deeply tied to El Alto's socio-economic context. This context is shaped by economic spaces marked by specific institutional frameworks, particularly those tied to family and social networks, alongside the prominent presence of social organizations, such as associations. As noted in the mentioned World Bank report, social capital is increasingly recognized as a critical driver of economic development [5]. Scheyvens and Van der Watt highlight social capital as a potential enabling factor for empowerment. My findings reinforce its significance in the case of El Alto. Yet, while social capital often functions as an enabler, for example, by facilitating women's entry into the tourism sector, in other

contexts, such as family businesses with horizontal labour relations, it can directly embody empowerment, contributing to economic satisfaction and more equitable participation. This distinction underscores that the role of social networks in empowerment is context-dependent, shaping both opportunities and outcomes.

The case of the *Escaladoras* demonstrates this clearly: their family-run businesses, organized around horizontal labour structures, foster greater economic and political empowerment by creating participatory environments that enhance individual agency. In this case, such labour relations are closely intertwined with the expression of indigenous identity in tourism, particularly using the *pollera*, together reinforcing the economic dimension of empowerment.

In contrast, the *Luchadoras* operate within vertically structured labour systems, where hierarchies limit autonomy and constrain both economic and political empowerment. Although expressing indigenous identity provides them with an income advantage over male wrestlers, this does not straightforwardly translate into full empowerment. Many *Luchadoras* express dissatisfaction with their earnings; a perspective that must be taken seriously. As Scheyvens and Van der Watt argue, economic disempowerment can occur when income is distributed unequally, in this context, within vertical structures. In this case, the expression of indigenous identity appears to contribute primarily to cultural and psychological empowerment, rather than to economic or political dimensions. Ultimately, the key distinction between these two groups lies in their labour structures, underscoring the importance of broader socioeconomic arrangements in shaping empowerment.

Associations further illustrate these dynamics, functioning both as enablers and as direct contributors to empowerment. For the *Escaladoras*, their association was essential in gaining entry to the mountaineering sector, carving out professional space in a previously exclusionary market. Similarly, the guides' association directly supports empowerment by improving working conditions, offering training, and combating discrimination. By contrast, the absence of an association among the *Luchadoras* has limited their collective agency, constraining their empowerment across social, economic, and political dimensions.

In conclusion, empowerment is a complex and context-dependent process. Socio-economic conditions play a significant role in shaping opportunities, experiences, and outcomes, influencing how empowerment manifests across different dimensions and contexts. For instance, comparing the *Escaladoras* and the *Luchadoras* illustrates how labour structures, family networks,

and associations interact to enable or constrain empowerment in different ways. This comparison shows that even within the same territory, distinct groups of women experience empowerment differently, underscoring the importance of socio-economic factors in shaping empowerment processes.

Instead of asking whether tourism empowers indigenous women in a general sense, this study calls for a nuanced approach that considers the conditions, structures, and relationships that shape empowerment differently for various groups. Such an approach not only helps explain why empowerment emerges in some contexts but not in others but also offers a more holistic understanding of empowerment. Looking ahead, comparative research across diverse settings could further clarify how different socio-economic arrangements shape empowerment, offering valuable insights for both scholarship and policy design.

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