

The exploration of Iranian solo female travellers' experiences

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International Journal of Tourism Research, 2021, 1-14.

DOI: 10.1002/jtr.2498

Abstract

For various reasons, some women experience solo travel in different parts of the world. However, as with many leisure activities, access to travel and tourism does not have the same distribution between different social groups, including other classes and genders (men and women). While there is a growing body of research on solo female travellers, few studies have included women from Middle Eastern or Muslim majority countries. Drawing upon a series of in-depth interviews, this paper examines the travel experiences of Iranian solo female travellers, which have been mainly overlooked in prior studies on the topic. The study's findings indicate that solo travel motivations can be categorized into personal factors: freedom and flexibility, self-empowerment, independence, and exploration. Also, the absence of family responsibilities, routines, and gender constraints, as well as the promotion of their social and personal selves, contributed to their well-being. The results also indicate that, despite the restrictions imposed by Iran's religious-patriarchal society, tourism has made women more visible in the public sphere. Overall, this study fills a significant gap in tourism research by highlighting the experience, limitations, and motivation of solo female travellers, which heralds social change.

Keywords: Constraints, female Muslim travellers, Iran, Iranian female travellers, motivations, social changes

1. Introduction

Nowadays, progress in gender parity has significantly increased female employment among emerging and developing countries. Women have more travel opportunities as their economic empowerment increases and, increasing numbers of females have recently started to travel independently in search of freedom, independence, and empowerment (Elliot, 2015). This change shows many women travelling independently (Wilson & Little, 2005, 2008). According to Yang et al. (2019), the number of Google searches for “travelling alone” has increased by 500% since 2009, as well as VISA, about 20% of tourists travelled alone in 2015. Since tourism is a social and cultural event, the travellers' experience as a socially structured factor, shaped by cultural standards, impacts their gender (Seow & Brown, 2018). Solo travellers are generally considered by scholars to be a social community. They form a unique group style and share similar values and behaviours (Adkins & Grant, 2007). Solo travel is not just a form of travel for most, but an expression of identity (Cohen & Cohen, 2015). Most of the motivation for all of these labels is embodied in ideals of independence, freedom, adventure, self-transformation, and personal development (Noy, 2004; O'Reilly, 2005). Women traveling solo have been widely discussed in tourism literature since the mid-1990s. The popularity of solo women's travel has motivated tourism scholars to study various aspects of this travel trend in different regions. One of the earliest research studies in this area was conducted by Wilson and Harris (2006), who examined “Women, independent travel, and the search for self and meaning”. Jordan and Aitchison (2008) examined the experiences of solo female tourists. This article explores the exercise of

power through the sexualization of women as subjects and objects of men's gaze in tourism. Some pioneers of this subject can be highlighted such as Heimtun and Abelsen (2013), Bianchi (2016), Chung et al. (2017), Seow and Brown (2018).

Nevertheless, many studies on gender and tourism focus on Western countries, and there is a lack of studies investigating the motivations and experiences of Muslim and Middle Eastern women on solo women travel with their particular cultural backgrounds. As Cohen and Cohen (2015) state, while solo travellers share some commonalities, the interpretation of tourism in emerging regions such as the Middle East, and Muslim countries differs importantly from the West. Therefore, more research into distinctions in tourism studies from these emerging regions is required.

Many restrictions for women have resulted from the strict influence of Islamic rules on the culture of Muslim traditional countries. Moreover, in Muslim majority countries, the Islamic religion is deeply woven into many aspects of daily life and laws (Moghadam et al., 2011). In the specific case of Iran, as in our case study, the Islamists took control of the revolution of 1979. For example, women are required to wear veils, men and women are separated in schools and public spaces, and many forms of collective pleasure, such as travel, are prohibited (Mahdavi & Funnell, 2012). Hegemonic masculinity has weakened the position of women in patriarchal Muslim societies such as Iran. In general, traditional Iranian men, influenced by Islamic law, hold to the "gheyrat" code of conduct, which allows for a sense of ownership and protection towards their female kin (Abedinifard, 2019; Nikjoo, Markwell, et al., 2021a; Nikjoo, Zaman, et al., 2021b). The World Economic Forum ranked Iran 148th out of 153 countries in its 2020 Gender Gap Report due to the extent of traditional and state discrimination against women (World Economic Forum, 2020). Nevertheless, despite the role of the State in strengthening Islamic laws in Iran through the formal channels and widespread suppression in Iran, the perception of the gender gap is not very widespread. With the social change, especially in the last decade, the number of Iranian solo women travelling both within Iran and internationally has increased significantly.

Despite the new contemporary social changes in the West of Asia, the issue of female travellers from the Middle East has given less attention to scholars. Moreover, there is little research on travel patterns, experiences, constraints, and their motivation in this region. Through observing and interviewing women who have participated in solo travel, there are some key considerations that drive the focus on Iranian solo women travellers in the current study.

First, while the growing trend of solo female tourists has attracted the attention of scholars (Jordan & Aitchison, 2008; Seow & Brown, 2018; Thomas & Mura, 2019; Weatherby & Vidon, 2018; Wilson & Harris, 2006; Wilson & Little, 2008), most of these studies refer to women from the West, although there is now a small but growing body of knowledge on female tourists from Asia (e.g., KhooLattimore & Mura, 2016a, 2016b, Seow & Brown, 2018, Yang et al., 2018; Nikjoo, Markwell, et al., 2021a; Nikjoo, Zaman, et al., 2021b). However, there is still a scarcity of studies on women traveling alone in Muslim countries, as well as studies on women's travel stories from one nation (Iran, as a Muslim country) which imposes limitations on women's travel.

The second would be that Iranian women have had an important socio-political role since ancient times, in contrast, the government has neglected their gender identity at leisure after the Islamic Revolution (Seyfi & Hall, 2019). In particular, hegemonic masculinity has weakened the position of women in patriarchal Muslim societies such as Iran. Men hold an unchallenged position of power that allows them to make decisions for themselves and the entire family (Moghadam, Knudson-Martin, & Mahoney, 2009). Therefore, women's freedom of movement is legally restricted by the need to obtain permission from their father or husband to travel domestically or abroad (Tavakoli & Mura, 2017). According to Nikjoo, Markwell,

et al. (2021a); Nikjoo, Zaman, et al. (2021b), men define women as the weaker gender who need support from men.

The third reason is that the religion of Islam is interwoven into many aspects of Iranian life, particularly in women's leisure time (Moghadam et al., 2009). As a result, women are not traditionally allowed to travel lonely, and women have been encountered some constraints, including family and religious opposition as well as negative attitudes from local people (Seyfi et al., 2020).

Fourth, societies in Asia are much more diverse and heterogeneous than in other parts, such as countries in the American South, Europe, or Australia. Moreover, the cultural heterogeneity in Asia is also remarkable among the countries in the East, the Center, and the Middle East. Therefore, the results of the previous studies conducted on solo travellers in East Asia cannot fully represent the challenges, obstacles, and experiences of solo travellers in the region of the Middle East and reflect the realities of these countries. As for Iran, this country has unique characteristics in terms of social context. The most crucial difference is that this country is Shia in the Islamic world, while other Islamic countries are Sunni. As a Shiite country, it presents some peculiarities: for example, there are no limitations for women to drive or work in the public administration (somewhat more advanced than in some neighbouring countries), but a very strict dress code and behaviour in public is maintained for women (somewhat stricter than neighbouring countries). Likewise, Iran presents a certain religious diversity: Shia, Sunni, Armenian Christian, and so forth, in addition to a notable ethnic and linguistic variety.

This study is rooted in gender, Leisure and Constraint study context, particularly the framework of gendered leisure proposed by Shaw (1994). According to Shaw (1994), three approaches influence women's leisure. The first approach focuses on the restrictions that women face in their leisure lives. The focus here is on how women are disadvantaged or oppressed within a patriarchal society, and how their subordinate status within that society limits their access to and enjoyment of leisure. In the second approach, the gendered nature of recreational participation is highlighted, and how traditional stereotypical activities reinforce and reproduce oppressive gender relations.

A third approach in the study of women's recreation is to see women's leisure as a source of resistance. The resistance argument arises from the definition of leisure as a situation of choice, control, and self-determination. Women's participation in activities, especially non-traditional 2 HOSSEINI ET AL. ones, can be seen as a challenge to restrictive social roles. Consequently, studies such as the one presented here are essential in contributing to a critical understanding of tourism as a gendered phenomenon. Hence, the main aims of this study are as follows:

- To determine the constraints associated with Iranian female solo travel.
- To identify the motivations and experiences for Iranian women who choose to travel alone.
- To explore the significance of Iranian women travelling alone and their broader role in personal enhancement.

Finally, the findings of this study demonstrate the role of solo travel in the empowerment process for Iranian solo travellers and their connection with social changes. The results show the ability to overcome women travellers in a country with specific restrictions for women and with strong religious and family pressure.

2. Literature Review

2.1. "Solo travel" as form of tourism, definition, motivation, and constraints

According to Jordan and Aitchison (2008), the "solo traveller" in tourist literature is the most common word used to describe these tourists. Some of the less popular common words are "independent travellers" (McNamara & Prideaux, 2010; Sanitmatcharo, 2006), "alone visitors" (Navare & Zagade, 2015), and "unaccompanied travellers" (Ashwell, 2015). Females travel for various reasons, and it is also significant to note that motivations are evolving throughout the life cycle (Gibson et al., 2012). With this in mind, when exploring the motivation of women to travel, it is crucial to discuss it on the basis of gender differences in leisure participation between men and women. Laessler et al. (2009) mentioned the major motivational factors for solo travellers as hedonism and social motivations. Moreover, they travel to catch the freedom, pursue adventure, feel personal satisfaction, be unique, and escape (Wilson & Little, 2005). Solo travellers are usually prepared to take risks and experience the unexpected in their choice of vacation elements (Wilson & Little, 2008). According to Mehmetoglu et al. (2001), people who travel by themselves have different motivations, such as resilience, investigation, independence, lack of a travel companion, spontaneity, prestige and loneliness. Besides, women's primary motivation for solo travel is to challenge themselves, feel independent, meet new people, and increase comfort in the context of female solo travel (Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Wilson & Harris, 2008). However, there are significant variations in age, revenue, occupation, and spending form between solo travellers. Several researchers described the motives of female solo travellers as a willingness to challenge themselves and to encounter a new group of people (Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Wilson & Little, 2005); and the desire to move beyond their comfort zone and build a sense of independence and autonomy (Wilson & Little, 2005). Yang et al. (2016), in a study about risk perception in Asian solo females, found that travellers choose solo travel as a transformative experience. Chiang and Jogaratnam (2006) have shown that the main influencing motivating for solo travel is an adventurous experience. According to Filep and Deery (2010), there are two motivational factors for all leisure activities, including travel: search and escape. Therefore, it can be seen that several different incentives, both internally and externally, contribute to travel decisions. Moreover, travelling alone gives females a sense of independence, management over time, and correct choices (Pereira & Silva, 2018; Shaw et al., 2013).

Throughout the past decade, females' social role and gendered position as "women" have intensely restricted their access to leisure participation (Jackson & Henderson, 1995). For example, women's social expectations were linked to the stereotypical image of marriage and children, stressing women's fundamental responsibilities as keepers of the family and caring for their husbands and children (Cambronero-Saiz, 2013). Jackson (1991) stated that limitations are described as variables that "inhibit people's ability to participate in leisure activities, to spend more time doing so, to take advantage of leisure services, or to achieve a desired level of satisfaction." According to Brown and Osman (2017), females have to confront gender-related barriers during their travel to pursue leisure experiences. Cultural norms always constrain them. Leisure has long been split in terms of gender and could limit travel arrangements and decisions (Wilson & Little, 2005). Wilson and Little (2008) note that Gendered distinctions in travel limitations are interpreted as representing the underlying unequal distribution of power structures in a patriarchal society. Crawford and Godbey (1987) mention that three dimensions are categorized as constraints: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. Intrapersonal limitations include personal attributes; interpersonal limitations involve social interactions; Structural barriers involve physiological and demographic elements that could disrupt preference and engagement. Some literature has reported the difficulties faced by women solo travellers. For instance, Brown and Osman (2017) stated that sexual harassment, insecurity, and sexual attention to women are significant restrictions. Besides, Berdychevsky et al. (2013) confirm that terror and exposure feelings because of the male gaze are important limiting factors. Cockburn-Wootten et al. (2006) found that women visitors frequently view males with mistrust and point to danger and safety as two main concepts. Also, family members may be exerting pressure on

the decision of a tourist to travel alone, given the family and social obligations that they might have at home. Wilson and Little (2005) recognize four kinds of constraints that limit female's movements before and after travel: Socio-cultural pressures (home forces that determine gender roles and attitudes, behaviour and interactions), personal and inner constraint (lack of self-awareness of trip alone). Practical limitation (lack of information of languages, lack geographical awareness of the region, resources, etc.). Special limitation (lack of security).

Solo travellers are increasingly becoming an important part of the rapidly growing international tourism market. Jordan and Aitchison (2008) note that independent female travellers have experienced significant and influential growth in the tourism industry. Therefore, it is clear that tourism can contribute to gender equality. According to Kinnaird and Hall (1996), the gender framework is helpful to analyze the relationships, differences, and inequalities of the tourism process concerning gender. "Gender equality is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Aspirations (SDGs) suggested at United Nations Sustainable Development Summit on 25 September 2015 and has long been considered a common goal of humanity" (Zhang & Zhang, 2020). The extensive literature on tourism and gender equality has been published, including Wilkinson and Pratiwi (1995), Ferguson (2011), Figueroa-Domecq et al. (2015), Alarcon and Cole (2019), and Alrwajfah et al. (2020). In this sense, Zhang and Zhang (2020) "have suggested that the focus of corporate social responsibility is on equal opportunities for men and women". Therefore, the tourism industry should reduce gender bias. Although tourism development has improved the position of women, several studies have found that there are still many restrictions to gender equality in tourism. For example, Duffy et al. (2015) found that as women become economically and socially independent, new gender roles and status changes lead to conflicts between women's actual needs and family relationships, which in turn limits women's continued participation in tourism. According to Nomnga (2017), women entrepreneurs continue to face numerous challenges such as low educational attainment and gender discrimination. In Islamic societies, in particular, women continue to be discriminated against in tourism employment, largely due to social and cultural factors that discourage women from participating in tourism (Alrwajfah et al., 2020; Masadeh et al., 2018; Uduji et al., 2020). Having adopted a gendered framework allows us to examine the travel experiences of women from Iran, a country where women's roles and opportunities are currently heavily constrained by and for the interests of men. Furthermore, adopting a gender framework gives us more conceptual space to analyze the lived experiences of these women on their journeys, to gain a better understanding of this case of gender differences and inequalities in tourism-related processes and activities, to analyze how tourism expresses gender relations and how these, in turn, inform and influence tourism, and to analyze the power relations associated with tourism (Nikjoo, Markwell, et al., 2021a; Nikjoo, Zaman, et al., 2021b). We argue that solo travel is a form of active resistance to Iranian gender relations that allows women to overcome personal fears and logistical challenges, and such critical analyze of self that may then lead to female self-transformation. Therefore, in this study we highlight the constraints women face on solo travel and how solo travel has helped participants distance themselves from responsibilities and everyday life in a variety of ways.

2.1.1. Muslim female and leisure

Walker et al. (2005) argued that women are faced with certain similarities in relation to their position in society, but ethnicity, race, religion and class are additional characteristics to be considered. Therefore, to fully comprehend gender, it is necessary to examine cultural identity contexts as they relate to leisure. With the rapid growth of the Asian tourism market, Muslim countries have been becoming a significant destination. The Muslim tourism market provides tremendous possibilities for destinations or countries that can satisfy these new travellers (PATA, 2016). It could be stated that younger Muslims are major players supporting the market development of all Muslim tourism (Bakar

et al., 2018). However, in some Islamic cultures, imposing severe restrictions on women is highly remarkable and patriarchal. According to Okhovat (2010), the “inferior status of women” in the Middle East is legitimized by the “misinterpretation” of religious scriptures. As a result, it creates barriers to participation in tourism and other areas of activity. Asbollah et al. (2013) have researched Muslim female travellers from Southeast Asia. The authors show that their travel activity is restricted by gender rules and religious traditions, including the scope of destinations where women adhere to Islamic dress and where halal food and prayer rooms are available. The authors also have observed that Muslim women travellers tend to travel with family and not travel independently. The findings showed that the mobility of women to get about is generally restricted in traditional Muslim societies. For example, according to Othman (2006), men believe that Muslim women must seek their husbands' permission to participate in leisure activities. Solo female backpackers in Muslim and Asian countries should encounter several challenges and resolve various objective and subjective risks according to religion and tradition, some of which are faced by other solo female travellers, but many of them are unique (Paris et al., 2015). Asbollah et al. (2013) emphasize the importance of Islamic identity and its impact on the perceptions, habits, and preferences, and behaviours of Islamic women in the field of tourism. However, the woman is unabashed about fusing her Islamic belief and comfort with modernity. According to Wilson and Little (2005), it is not only Muslim women who encounter the challenges of travelling alone. Besides, Western women solo travellers to Muslim countries were not welcomed. Shadid and van Koningsveld (2002) argued that women were restricted by Islam and faced by local social norms and traditions. Thus, Muslim women are more affected than Islamic doctrines by the tension of socio-cultural influences. However, Islam says that people can travel from one location to another without any constraint. Asbollah et al. (2013) argue that the forces of renovation and globalization could change this culture, and Muslim women are likely to seek more individualistic and independent travel experiences in the future. Therefore, travelling as a significant activity in Muslim women's leisure lives can help them restore their self-identity and gender equality.

2.1.2. Women and tourism in Iran

Females make up nearly 50% of the Iranian population. Today, women in Iran are taking on new roles and exploring different identities due to the globalizing trend (Seyfi & Hall, 2019). Nevertheless, religion's interpretation can create barriers to female participation in tourism and leisure activities in the Middle East (Okhovat, 2010). Iran has been ruled by Islamists since the 1979 revolution. Abedinifard (2019) argues that the interpretation of women's rights among recent Iranian leaders is rooted in Islamic texts in which house chores are the primary responsibility of women. Moreover, Iranian society has been characterized since the Islamic revolution in 1979 by a double set of sharia and “urf” (some Islamic laws) legislation that has tended in the private and public fields to limit women's freedom (Seyfi et al., 2020; Seyfi & Hall, 2019). As a result, men are given priority in education, employment, and many other areas of society that generate power and wealth (Rafatjah, 2012). With this Islamic definition of the status of women, Iran occupies one of the lowest places in the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report (2020). These different religious, ideological, and political conditions have meant that females in Iran face obstacles, limitations in participating in tourism activities (Okhovat, 2010). Women face restrictions on their travelling from planning to travel, such as family opposition to their opposing views. Besides, under Iran's Islamic law, women cannot travel without their guardians' permission (father), and women must be allowed to travel by husband if they are married (Seyfi & Hall, 2019). Despite all the laws, religions, and traditions that discriminate against Iranian women, Iranian society has changed in favour of women's role in society (Davoodi et al., 2019). Besides, nonetheless, in Iran, the perception of the gender gap is not wide. Eger (2020) argued that the description of gender (in)equality in some Muslim countries (such as Iran) deviates to some extent from the normative discussion of equality. While a group of women in Iran believes in

traditional and Islamic interpretations of gender roles, some (especially new generations of women) are resisting these definitions of femininity and attempting to redefine the position of women based on normative feminist ideas (Khalajabadi-Farahani et al., 2019). In addition, the lives of Iranian women are changing rapidly due to communication technology and globalization. Opportunities for education and careers provide incentives for women to improve their lives. Iranian women have improved their level of incorporation into the labour market, standing at 19.9% of the labour force in 2019 (it was 11% in 1990). These figures are somewhat higher than those of the Persian Gulf countries (Emirates, 17.5%, Saudi Arabia, 15.5%) and similar to the average for the Middle East and North Africa (19.7%), but they are very different from the Muslim countries figures from the former Soviet Union or Western countries (World Bank, 2020).

Recently, outbound and domestic tourism in Iran has been on the rise, with Iranian people encountering more diverse cultures as a consequence (Tavakoli & Mura, 2017). Traditional Iranian society also has progressively changed, especially with the advent of the Internet, and many members of the younger generations no longer value traditions. Therefore, women sometimes try to compare their lives to those of freer women in other countries and compensate for past limitations. Moreover, despite all the judgment against women by law, religion, and tradition, Iranian society has changed in favour of women's position in society (Davoodi et al., 2019). According to Fadaee (2018) and Tavakoli and Mura (2017), these changes in women's rights are mainly due to the ubiquity of the internet and the emergence of a new middle class of educated young women who are increasingly seeking new lifestyles and leisure activities. In addition to that, thanks to globalization and have access to social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter) women have become more aware of the latest trend in their related issues such as the way of spending leisure time or solo traveling as their primary right. Despite the aforementioned problems and challenges, women in Iran can travel alone. In recent years, the demand for female-led holidays has grown dramatically in Iran and created more opportunities for women to work in nontraditional positions, such as travel guides. As well, Iranian feminist movements have undergone a significant shift towards gender equity and women's empowerment (Khalajabadi-Farahani et al., 2019). Fadaee (2018) mentions that the number of Iranian women who reject men's control over their lives and strive for greater agency and emancipation is increasing. In particular, Iranian women are attempting to redefine the position of women in Iranian society by challenging what they see as outdated stereotypes imposed by tradition, religion, and law. Consequently, Iranian women are more likely to defy societal gender norms by traveling alone if they gain education and economic independence, as these factors improve their bargaining power for traveling alone. In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the reception of international tourists in Iran; the arrival of tourists has increased from 5.2 million tourists in 2015 to 9.1, in 2019. The departure of Iranian tourists has also been increasing in these years, from 6.6 in 2015 to 10.5 (2017) and 7.2 in 2018 (this decrease is due to the beginning of the economic crisis linked to international sanctions) (UNWTO, 2020). As far as domestic tourism is concerned, in 2017, there were 65 million trips in Iran, which gives us some idea of the importance of the domestic market (Seyfi et al., 2018). Women participate with relative equality in the main tourist activities (leisure, pilgrimage, visit friends and relatives) except in business, which is mainly a male activity. This reason for travel is between 10% (Ghaderi, 2011) and 4.9% (Seyfi et al., 2018). Therefore, we estimate that the flow of female tourists should be between 45% and 40% of total domestic tourism.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design

Qualitative research has been chosen as the method for obtaining data as the most appropriate approach to addressing sensitive and complex issues (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015). Besides, because of the study's relatively exploratory nature, qualitative methods were considered appropriate to explore the

personal and subjective interpretations of how the history of solo travel affected women (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It also permitted participants to express their ideas and feelings freely. While many scholars have conducted quantitative studies with extensive data on solo women travellers, such simple data do not have an in-depth understanding of these travellers' perceptions and feelings. According to Riley and Love (2000), it is not easy to understand the actions and behaviours of travellers quantitatively. The framework of analysis used in this study has helped us to investigate the subjective nature of people's experiences (Cohen et al., 2013).

3.2. Sampling, collection, and data analysis

This study's parameters were specific, and the authors were aware of the people to be interviewed for the research. Islamic norms present obstacles and challenges for travelling women in Iran. The author's knowledge of Iran's social context was beneficial in asking questions and conducting in-depth interviews. For example, married Iranian women require written permission from their husbands to leave Iran. Without this permission, it is not possible to leave the country. Therefore, knowing such social rules and norms, the author tried to get a deeper understanding of the research subject and its design during the interview. Moreover, given the traditional and evolving context in Iran, the practice of solo travel by women is a deconstructive act that is welcomed and supported by one section of modern Iranian society, in contrast another section strongly condemns such travel. Considering that one of the authors is Iranian, the author's awareness of these social norms led to heated, challenging conversations with the participants in this study, so its results would provide a good representation of the different aspects of travelling alone. Nevertheless, systematic networks of solo female travellers in tourism in Iran were not available to the researchers. The researchers thus adopted a purposive and snowball sampling method to enable them to answer research questions. This purposive sampling has been considered most appropriate to obtain an appropriate sample for this study (Flick, 2018). The initial call to request an interview was created via Instagram, WhatsApp, and e-mails to explain the purpose of the research. All those who responded positively have been contacted to explain the interview process and to ask for a phone, WhatsApp, and Skype interview for their availability. In qualitative studies, developing internet technologies as a research medium has been recognized and is more beneficial for some difficult-to-reach and geographically distributed groups (Hanna, 2012). The participants had to be Iranian women with solo travel experience for leisure, and one of their trips must have been international. Qualitative studies mainly target a fairly small, focused sample to comprehend the individuality of the phenomenon being explored (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). This study followed the concept of "data saturation" (Creswell & Poth, 2016), and theoretical saturation has been achieved after 13 interviews. Due to the uniqueness of these trips in Iran, the age group chosen was between 24 and 40 years old. All of them held a university degree. Over half of them had between €3000 and €4000 annual income. A majority of them (over 86%) had made at least 1–2 international trips in the previous 12 months. Qualitative research has mostly focused on a relatively small target to comprehend the individuality and singularity of the phenomenon being explored (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). Questions were framed according to the research's focus and were selected from various related studies (Wilson, 2005, 2008; Yang & Tung, 2018; Seow & Brown, 2018). The interviews included these subjects: the first history of solo travel, reasons and motivations for travelling alone, the experience of travel, limitations as an Iranian woman, and outcomes. The average time that each interview lasted was 50 min. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. Interviews were conducted in Persian and translated into English by the interviewer. All authors read the transcripts to ensure accuracy and value for the objective of the study. Ethical considerations were of the utmost importance. After ending the interview, a sample was sent to the participants to ensure the accuracy of the discussions. They were given assurances that they would remain anonymous, and pseudonyms are used to protect identity. The participants' profiles were given in Table 1. This study used thematic analysis research published by Braun

and Clarke in 2006 during the analysis phase. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis as a systemic method entails defining key themes, classifying themes-based data, and evaluating categorized themes by recognizing commonalities, relationships, and critical themes.

Table 1. Participants' profile

Pseudonym	Age	Years of experience in solo trips	Level of education	Occupation	Marital status
Ima	33	10	BA	Social worker	Single
Mina	28	6	MA	Civil servant	Single
Samira	35	6	BA	Accountant	Single
Sajadeh	33	7	BA	Assistant engineer	Single
Roya	34	17	MA	Content writer	Married
Fatemeh	34	10	MA	Content writer	Widow
Samaneh	38	15	MA	Content writer	Married
Mahsa	36	12	MA	Administrator	Married
Nazanin	35	13	MA	Administrator	Married
Behnaz	27	5	BA	Secretary	Single
Bahareh	31	9	Ph.D.	Administrator	Married
Yasamin	27	5	MA	Financial officer	Single
Zahra	32	6	MA	Social worker	Single

Source: Authors

Table 2. Main codes, basic themes and themes

Codes	Basic themes	Themes
Cultural barriers, solo women internal fear (interpersonal fear) commitment and opposite of the family.	Family, society constraints, harassment and gaze	Solo travel barriers and challenges
Escape the routine, create life of travel curious, explore novelty, make your own choice.	Freedom, escaping and exploring new communities' locations, self-discovery, reliance, growth	Solo travel motivation
Social empowerment, increase self-confidence, financial empowerment, self-awareness, autonomy, time managing.	Autonomy, empowerment, and self-awareness.	Outcome of solo travelling

Source: Authors

This step's focus is on a broad theme and includes the categorization of different codes into potential themes in the five-steps. After the interview process, the authors repeatedly read the transcribed, and the initial results were noted. Therefore, getting familiar with the data phase, which is the first stage of the thematic analysis, has been carried out. At the second stage of implementation (generating the initial codes), the data related to each code collected and the data systems' printing functions were coded in the whole data set. Then, at the third stage (searching for themes), all data relating to each potential theme and codes were collected. At the fourth stage, the review of the themes was revised using the mixed codes. At the fifth stage, the themes were defined with the objectives of research and literature. In this study, three underlying themes are identified: solo trip barriers and challenges, solo travel motivation, and the outcome of solo travel. These codes included harassment; gaze; culture; empowerment; fear; and women's

position. The relationship of codes, essential themes, and themes is presented in the thematic network table below (Table 2).

4. Research findings

The results of the present study show that Iranian women feel free to travel solo because, on the one hand, they can escape from family obligations and some women-related constraints and, on the other hand, they can develop their social and personal selves. Moreover, the feeling of freedom from the responsibilities they feel at home grants them a break from everyday life it makes them happy and being away from some of the restrictions women face in a Muslim society gives them an exciting feeling of emancipation.

4.1. Solo travel barriers and challenges

4.1.1 Family and society constraints

Both at home and abroad, the socio-cultural background has always been a dominant constraining influence on females' lives and solo female travel choices, opportunities, and experiences (Wilson & Little, 2005). There is a prevailing mentality in Iranian society that views women as weak and believes that it is better for a woman should live family's shadow and give value and credibility to her female identity by serving at home. Jackson and Henderson (1995) argued that gender stereotype is a set of social beliefs about the expected roles and behaviours of Males and Females. While social changes led to beneficial impacts and freedoms, this will not mean that females enjoy leisure and tourism without any limitations or challenges. As well, Family members can often in traditional society put pressure on a traveller's decision to travel alone. The first constraint mentioned by the participants looked at the disapproving attitudes of societies, families, or friends. The interviewees admitted that there is some stigma in their families about traveling alone. Indeed, travelling alone is unacceptable in traditional Iranian culture, and it is recommended that women remain safe at home rather than risk travelling and risking the dangers of the outside world. As two interviewees commented:

Ima: Of course, there is a substantial negative attitude among Iranian families to female solo travel. I remember the first time I wanted to start my journey; my father objected. Nevertheless, over the years, my family's attitude has changed for the better; it does not mean they are not worried about me.

Samira: There are too many people in Iran who disagree that a woman can go on a journey on her own. This is the primary motivation that convinced me to start my journey. I wanted to prove to those around me that a woman can travel without a travel companion.

Roya: I was confronted with too much resistance from my family and my husband. They told me why a woman was not supposed to go on a trip alone. However, whatever they insisted on their opinions, my motivation to travel increased.

Fatemeh: My primary motivation for solo travel was to break the negative perception of weakness that has always been attributed to women in Iran.

An ideal mother or daughter in many cultures sacrifices her needs for the family (McGannon et al., 2015) As a result, a woman who prioritizes other activities such as leisure would feel an inner sense of guilt (Miller & Brown, 2005). As all the participants are Iranian, they are impressed by the Islamic culture and religion, which tends to be conservative and traditional. Moreover, in traditional cultures, travelling alone is unacceptable and women are advised to stay safe at home rather than risk travel to the outside world. There are too many people in Iran who do not agree that a woman can go on a trip alone. When I asked

one of the participants: Did you choose this kind of trip just to oppose your family? She mentions, "I wanted to prove to the people around me that a woman can travel without a travel companion".

However, this research notes that with reports and feedback on successful solo trips, such attitudes among families have changed over time and that women have described their stories about family or friends. Single women have used a confrontational attitude towards the family and struggle for independence to overcome these challenges. Married women customarily and legally (especially when travelling abroad) needed their spouse's consent and permission. They had several strategies to deal with this issue. In the face of severe opposition, some have adopted a strategy of passivity and tolerance, reducing the number of solo trips, applying for short-term travel, or contenting themselves with pilgrimage journeys. Some married women were also strongly opposed to the country's discriminatory laws against women and social custom, which considers that women are subordinate to men. By pursuing and insisting, they demanded the legal opportunities available to them under the law. Men, too, seemed to succumb to this seriousness.

4.1.2. Fear, harassment and subjective of the gaze

The honest truth is that many people are afraid of the idea of travelling alone. Fear of what we do not know is a human trait and is in our nature. Yang et al. (2017) have noted that males and females could view risk differently because some risk is imposed on females by males, such as the risk of sexual violence, which manifests male control over women. When people travel to new or unfamiliar countries or societies, it can be a daunting task for many tourists, especially those who choose to travel independently (Wilson & Little, 2005). For example, Whyte and Shaw (1994) described the fear of violence as a reason for females not participating in various leisure recreation activities (Deem, 1996). Besides, limitations such as fear for personal safety and the emotion of vulnerability appear to decrease women's participation in leisure recreation activities (Deem, 1996). Respondents spoke about fear and harassment as factors that constrained their enjoyment of the travel. Their fears stemmed from their condition as solo female tourists and their perception of their vulnerability as Iranian women. AS shown in the examples below:

Sajadeh: A person who has the experience of group travel then begins individual travelling, he or she gets annoyed. For example, when you go to other cities and when you get a taxi or any vehicle, mainly if the city is small, they (local people) gaze at you a lot, and this is very painful. I had to stay in a small town one night, and I was terrified that all passengers were men. They were talking and smoking loudly until the late morning, and I could not sleep.

Samira: In our culture, there has always been a negative view of women. For example, when you are standing on a street and wanting to get a car, you are faced with a negative look from passing cars and embarrassing offers and this happened to me personally.

Mahsa: As a woman travelling alone, the main thing is feeling unsafe in cities and places. To avoid the sexualized gaze, I frequently remove myself from men's view. Thus, I do not have enough opportunities to walk around the streets alone or for meeting members of the host community and other travellers. I think the worst thing is that the local community looks at you as a foreigner. They would never understand this kind of activity (solo travel).

Since in a patriarchal culture, especially in traditional and religious societies such as Iran, women always are placed on the blame. Reactions to sexual harassment vary; from censure and ridicule to pity and contempt. Nearly all women felt that they were regarded as physically "accessible" solely, notably, they were travelling alone without male accompaniment. Therefore, in this situation, women prefer silence. And they refused to recite some distressing travel conditions when they went to their families. The interviewee's participants' accounts manifested the prevalence of stranger harassment and the local men's gaze on female tourists. Comparing interviewees' harassment episodes, focusing on characteristics such as

gender, being solo and not being familiar with locations etc., they may have been targeted because they were female and alone. Moreover, cultural and Islamic identities have become more visible in some destinations and thus attracted more attention. For instance, Samira was standing on a street and wanted to get a car, and she was faced with a negative look from passing cars and local people. However, most of the participants in our study claimed that they were lucky not to have been victims of some unfortunate incidents.

4.2. Solo Travel Motivation

4.2.1. Freedom from responsibilities

According to Shaw et al. (2013), women opt to travel alone because they want to achieve a sense of freedom and control over time and decision-making during their solo trips. For some Iranian women, traveling with family, although it has its advantages, is an extension of daily life and cannot relieve them of the routine duty they experience when traveling with family. It should be noted that in family travel, the primary responsibility for the trip lies with the women. For example, the cooking and the care of the children. Becoming a mother is full of sacrifice in many cultures, and afterward, many women give up some of their hobbies, dreams, and plans (Nikjoo, Markwell, et al., 2021a; Nikjoo, Zaman, et al., 2021b). In Iran, Islamic traditions and laws place a double burden on women regarding household duties. One of the most important factors for women's travel seems to be the absence of daily family responsibilities. Three of the respondents commented how individual travelling allowed her to do whatever she wanted:

Fatemeh: I was relaxed because and belonged to myself, free from all the stress at home; this trip gives me back emancipation, relieves me, and helps me come home in a better mood. I could go where I wanted, and I could do what I wanted. Travel planning is under my own authority, and I don't worry about other people's opinions or explaining my choices to other people.

Nazanin: I embarked on my first solo trip to Turkey, and I was truly able to travel into the unknown on my own, and this opportunity made me realize who I am outside of my safe and comfortable space. When you're in a safe and comfortable environment, you often get distracted by your work, your friends, and your life, and things happen all the time that you never have a moment to be alone with yourself. Concluded that my solo journey was a new beginning for me because I didn't have to check myself against outside factors that prevent me from focusing and resting

Participants stated that they take pleasure in determining their travel plans without having any restrictions, and they are free to do their interests without worrying about what others will think. Some of them viewed solo travel as more comfortable because it allowed them to make their travel plans and events and do whatever they wished without sharing with someone else. It seems that the break from being a mother and daughter leads these women back to freedom. The feeling of freedom from the responsibilities that they feel at home gives them a break from mundane life and makes them happy.

4.2.2. Escaping and exploring new communities and locations

Elsrud (2005) argued that women solo travellers just are not travelling alone to see new places but to get new insights and a way that escapes society's pressure and changes the image of men's stereotype towards women. To respect Islamic rules and traditional culture, some women cannot express their whole and genuine selves in the presence of men outside their immediate family and while travelling, for example, they cannot dance or sing. Therefore, travelling alone gives them the space to express who they really want. According to Petty and Trussell (2019), being a woman is not in itself a barrier to leisure and travel;

instead, it is the culturally shaped expectation that women should take on more household and caregiving responsibilities. Escaping from their daily routine gave respondents the opportunity to re-evaluate and find purpose and meaning in their lives. As some interviewees commented::

Nazanin: To me, exploring, discovering, and seeing new places and getting to know local people are the primary motivation for solo travel. Escape from daily work and routine activities were the primary motivation. Besides that, I wanted to have a different experience and escape from limitations.

“For centuries Iranian culture has influenced under Islamic law, and men have learned to promote and defend their women and have also been following Gheyrat codes to preserve their own honour” (Nikjoo, Markwell, et al., 2021a; Nikjoo, Zaman, et al., 2021b). Whereas almost all women disapprove of it and recognize it as restrictive and opposite to their freedom. Finding in this research differs from the escape of Western female tourists reported in Western-centric studies. “Freedom” for Western female travellers has more to do with “escaping” from the daily routine of life, while Iranian solo women seek their independence in a dominant male society. All interviewees wanted to escape a lifestyle dictated by family and Iranian society. Quotation one of the respondents represents the negative perception of limitation: “You are required to follow their principles while traveling with your family.” You are supposed to sit together, walk together, eat together, sleep together at the same time, not laugh out loud. We have to limit ourselves because of their way of thinking. When you travel alone, you can do whatever you want. Lie on the beach all day, go shopping all evening, or spend the night in your little tent in the woods instead of a hotel”.

4.2.3. *Self-discovery, reliance, and growth*

Traditional Iranian society has gradually changed, especially with the advent of the Internet, and many younger generations have not attached importance to tradition. The whole of the women we interviewed faced the 1979 Iranian revolution, extreme Islamism, economic shortages, and it was gone many of their desires. Consequently, for this generation, solo travel includes both a physical journey, self-discovery, and a path to personal development. Its meaning cannot be underestimated in their lives. Solo travel encouraged some women to experience adventures they had never had before. Some interviewees stated that one of the most significant reasons for solo travel was about getting to know themselves. As two interviewees commented:

Bahareh: The first motivation was self-discovery and finding out how I could deal with problems. Besides, my primary motivation for solo travel was to challenge myself, and whether I would overcome them or not. I grew up in a very religious family, and I had to get permission from my family for everything, even to go out with my friends. I've always had to start and finish something with fear and stress. After I was able to finish my studies and find a job, I decided to save myself from this situation.

For some of the interviewees, their motivation to start their solo journey was because they wanted to experience personal transformation. The consequences of these travel can improve their general well-being. Travel allowed them space to discover new things about themselves, which could have become one of the reasons why they were still motivated to continue travelling and to strive to become the best possible version of themselves that was controlled by traditional families as Samira and Bahareh pointed out. Closed cultures always monopolize women in traditional societies, especially in Islamic culture. Fatemeh wrote about how she grew up in a strict conservative family, which led her to grow up sheltered, resulting in the fear of being alone. When she started earning her own money, she wanted an opportunity

to explore, grow and achieve self-discovery about her life. She decided to travel alone, believing that this was what she had always been looking for. Another example appeared when we asked Ima what she searches in solo travel “If you are yourself, you will undoubtedly face various situations, some of which are scary! All you have to do is help yourself get rid of them! Just like in life! In addition to all the exciting experiences you will have, you can tell a lot of interesting stories, adventures from which you will meet new friends, and it turns out that with a simple trip, your life will change”.

4.3. Outcome of solo travelling (Personal development)

4.3.1. Autonomy, empowerment, and self-awareness.

A sense of autonomy, individuality, challenge, empowerment, and self-awareness are the main reasons women choose to travel independently (Chiang & Jogaratnam, 2006; McNamara & Prideaux, 2010; Wilson & Little, 2008). Individual travel for females is a way of seeking self-identity and self-development (Wilson & Harris, 2006). In the patriarchal and religious society of Iran, according to Islamic laws, women have always been seen as a tool for generational survival and male gratification, and women have never been able to find their true human status in the real world. In the context of Iranian solo female travellers, the outcome of solo travel seems to consist of one theme that stems from a fundamental analysis of women's discourse and their narratives. The belief is that independent travel provides a productive perspective on reviewing the meaning of life and changing one's life because this type of travel affords time and space for reflection and self-development to individuals, especially women – away from partners, families, or friends. According to Seow and Brown (2018), this finding refers to the definition of meaningful travel, which represents a travel experience in which people seek or discover more confidence and empowerment, taking into account their choices and perspectives in life.

Behnaz: Travelling alone has made me change a lot. Right now, I feel strangeness and bravery. Now my public relations have improved, and I can trust people as well. I have gained more experience, more independence, and more confidence. The other knowledge I have gained is that I feel I was getting stronger than I used to be, and I can handle problems very well right now.

Some interviewees also stressed that travel has made them feel more confident by overcoming obstacles and meeting challenges.

Mina: Travel alone led to an improvement in my self-confidence and made me more independent to manage my time and be at peace with others. Without thinking about an issue, I would never accept anything. Now, I have been able to communicate with others because I used to be so shy.

Fatemeh: Solo travelling helped me to attain self-awareness. The biggest and the first thing that travel has taught me is self-confidence, and that emerges when you realize that you are in a predicament and that self-confidence will help you manage the crisis efficiently.

Being patient was one of the important items as one of the solo travel achievements. In previous solo research, this finding was discussed less or not mentioned. Most participants in this study mentioned the outcome of individual travel being increased patience. One of the respondents commented:

Ima: My patience and adaptation to my surroundings have increased a great deal. I learned that we do not have to get upset or happy very quickly because I know that after any upset, something good is going to happen. I mean, I am not as excited and emotional as I was before. In general, it gave me a different and broader view of life.

Women participants were incredibly proud to pursue their own holiday experiences, indicating that solo travel could be seen as a means of self-development (Uysal & Hagan, 1993). Besides, females are particularly travelling alone to find the strength to return to their everyday lives in travel space (Wantono & McKercher, 2020). In several studies, women in travel are looking for equality and autonomy (Yang et al., 2018).

In the end, the interviewer also asked the participants whether they would recommend this style of travel to other women, despite all the challenges it poses. Almost all of them replied that they would certainly recommend it. One of the interviewees commented:

Mahsa: I would definitely recommend it and believe that not only women but everyone needs to experience this kind of travel. When you're thousands of miles away from home and your language, you are going to have to gain confidence, and when you come across any problem, you are going to say that I was the same person who went there alone so that I can handle it. I think that girls should travel alone and free themselves from the shackles of the wrong culture. I always encourage girls to do that. Because if I don't do that, I am going to question my work.

5. Discussion

This study contributed to the literature on the female tourist experience by focusing on the experiences of Iranian women travelling solo. The findings of this study suggest three dimensions of "Solo travel barriers and challenges" two dimensions of "Solo travel 10 HOSSEINI ET AL. motivation" and one dimension of "Outcome of solo travelling" amongst solo Iranian women experiences. The well-being of these women is enhanced by their escape from responsibilities and daily life as well as their escape from gender roles and other dos and don'ts and their pursuit of social and personal development, especially in countries like Iran where formal rules and social norms work against women. Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 12 of the Iranian Civil Law and Political Rights state that everyone should be free to leave any country, but this right is taken away from Iranian women and given to their husbands. The Iranian Passport Act (Paragraph 3, Article 18) explicitly postpones the issue of passports for married women without the written consent of the husband.

The findings emphasize the importance of resistance in the decision of Iranian women to travel alone. Respondents have had to challenge and withstand societal limitations and gender expectations to undertake their trip. These ideologies were evident in Family satisfaction (parents and spouse), which is one of the biggest challenges' women faced before travelling. They forget their role as women and can spend time as if they were really young girls with only the labels of wife, mother. Furthermore, respondents during the trip have felt "gendered aloneness" (Yang et al., 2019) when they were asked why they were alone or where their family or husband was during their travels. This study confirms the findings of the previous study by Seow and Brown (2018). Iran ranks 140th out of 144 countries in terms of gender gaps. This, in itself, reflects the discriminatory situation that prevents women from participating in a variety of issues. We argue that solo travel was a transformational and self-awareness experience which allowed them to achieve self-confidence and made them more independent and braver, and travelling alone is also a way for them to challenge and push borders. Furthermore, there is a significant relationship in this study between personal development, empowerment and self-awareness. Their motivation to escape the traditional roles of domesticity as a woman, the gender discrimination they have experienced in Iranian tourism, and the personal growth and broadening of connections they have made throughout their travel experience. Although Such findings of empowerment are consistent with previous research, our study shows that women's rights to enjoy excursions fully are hampered in many traditional Iranian families due

to stereotypical expectations for women and the control exerted over them. Therefore, even a temporary release from these expectations gives women a sense of freedom, happiness, and empowerment, in solo journeys. In addition, among all the barriers and challenges, issues of women's control over their lives and the ability to do what they want without a man's permission were frequently raised in their experiences. These personal experiences were told in ways that sought to encourage and motivate other women. The major difference between the current study and other research on women traveling alone concerns the restrictions imposed by cultural traditions and Islamic rules on Iranian women. To abide by Islamic rules, many Iranian women adhere to strict Islamic dress codes and avoid wishing to have fun. Solo travel gives them a space to express a more authentic, real, happy, and fun version of themselves.

in the absence of men. The opportunity to freely laugh, sing, dance and express themselves in a feminine way gives them a sense of joy that is usually denied to them in Iran (Nikjoo, Markwell, et al., 2021a; Nikjoo, Zaman, et al., 2021b). Compared to non-Muslim women then, travelling alone has a greater impact on their well-being and Self-discovery. Travelling alone enabled them to do what they had previously feared. Moreover, this opportunity brought them great joy and unforgettable experiences. It is noteworthy that the nature of participation in solo travel evoked independence and empowerment in participants who felt highly dependent on or controlled by their families. Moreover, Iranian women view solo travel as a valuable "experience" in their lives, allowing them to explore the world and learn new things. Commonly, based on religion and culture, Iranian women are portrayed as submissive and lacking independence, and travelling allows them an "indulgent" chance to enjoy private leisure time without a job or family obligations. Therefore, travelling alone offers an appropriate stage for Iranian women to resist and challenge both rooted gender stereotypes and the socio-cultural pressures imposed on themselves. What's more, the routine life of most of the people we interviewed was too boring. That is why breaking away from worldly and depressed lives has restorative effects for them. One of the things we saw in the interview was that the extent and areas of self-censorship of Muslim women are more than Western women. This kind of view was due to the fear of the traditional and religious codes that exist in traditional Iranian society. In line with previous studies (Karagöz et al., 2021; Osman et al., 2020; Pereira & Silva, 2018; Johnson, 2010; Jordan & Aitchison, 2008; Reichel et al., 2007; Seow & Brown, 2018; Wilson & Little, 2008; Yang et al., 2018; Nikjoo, Markwell, et al., 2021a; Nikjoo, Zaman, et al., 2021b), our findings on female solo travellers also have found that factors such as freedom, flexibility, self-empowerment, achieving a sense of independence and emancipation, overcoming anxiety have an important role in solo traveling, the significant contributions made in this article to the literature on solo female travellers lie in its focus on religious and cultural limitations for Iranian women travelling solo as an Islamic country. Applying a social-cultural and Islamic lens towards the Iranian solo female travellers demonstrated that women in Iran are pursuing a liberal lifestyle similar to their Western counterparts, but faced challenges stemming from their socio-cultural backgrounds still. It was also discovered that women travellers openly rejected the traditional roles of their families and Iranian society. However, this does not mean that they have disassociated themselves from their Iranian identity. Instead, they have found new ways of interpreting the values that represent their identities in a new Iranian society. These transformations identified in Iranian women constitute an example of the social change which is taking place in Iran. we found that women's rights to fully enjoy excursions are hampered in many traditional Iranian families due to stereotypical expectations for women and control over them. As traditionally women are not allowed to travel alone, many Muslim women's travelling plans require approval from other family members. These obligations and responsibilities affect women's decisions and mobilities in many aspects of life. According to Shaw (1994), leisure participation can have a constricting effect on women's lives by reinforcing traditional gender relations and femininity ideologies. That is, leisure and the constraints imposed by leisure cannot be understood without reference to gender-based societal structures. For example, cultural and societal norms expect Iranian women to be

caring mothers, obedient daughters, and subservient wives. This study also highlights the importance of resistance in Iranian women's decision to travel solo. In the case of Iranian females, it was clear that solo travel provided opportunities for Iranian women to actively resist dominant gender roles and relationships. For many of the women, solo travel was an act of resistance to and liberation from the socio-cultural and political restrictions they experienced in their lives in Iran. According to Khoo-Lattimore and Wilson (2017), female solo travellers' resistance to constraints can lead to opportunities for empowerment and greater control. In particular, the Iranian solo woman seeks to reshape the role of women in Iranian society by opposing what she sees as outdated stereotypes imposed by tradition, religion, and law. "The literature on resistance focuses primarily on ways in which leisure participation, especially self-determined leisure, can empower women and help them to resist cultural pressures to conform to prescribed social roles and to traditional definitions of femininity" (Shaw, 1994). We argued that this finding acknowledges not only the various types of resistance, but also the relationship between resistance, leisure, and social structures. Furthermore, In line with previous studies on self-awareness and alteration through travel (Kirillova et al., 2017; Nikjoo, Markwell, et al., 2021a; Nikjoo, Zaman, et al., 2021b; Pung et al., 2020), We discovered that solo female travellers can benefit from travel as a transformative practice by having access to spaces for experiencing new cultures, meeting new people, trying to overcome fears and challenges, and having novel experiences. Another unique focus of this article to the literature on the solo female tourist is its emphasis on the participants' cultural and religious backgrounds. Being Muslim in traditional culture significantly impacted the ease with which they decided and were "allowed to travel alone, and it affected their embodied tourist experience, exacerbating the harassment that lone women are frequently subjected to and the strategies adopted to ward off negative attention and potential danger".

6. Implications and directions for future research

This research gives some insight into female Iranian tourists who tend towards an independent form of travel. Solo Iranian female travel shows an unshaped wave of feminism hidden under the concept of patriarchy that has ruled over them for many years. Also, this study's findings have shown the need for a more inclusive tourism space for women. Tourism providers can concentrate their marketing techniques on supplying more comprehensive services to this new market by understanding Iran's solo female travellers' motivations. For a deeper understanding of women's travel issues in Iran, future research is recommended concerning ethnographic studies. However, in Iran, it is noted that such research must be carried out with great sensitivity. Future research should be focused on comparative research with other Islamic countries to identify the variables that influence women and longitudinal studies that are more sensitive to understanding change factors. Muslim women's participation in politics, business, and society is slowly increasing in the Middle East region. However, it is important to note that these Muslim women are not all the same. In fact, they are very diverse and do not represent any single culture or region. Islamic feminist theory highlights how inequality due to socio-cultural factors has influenced and shaped women's potential. Moreover, most Muslim countries follow traditional Islamic rules and culture regarding women. From this perspective, some challenges faced by women are similar. Therefore, the hospitality and tourism industry should consider their common experiences and cultural traditions. Considering that the practices of Islam are diverse and the circumstances in Muslim countries are unique, more attention should be paid to the study of Islam, gender and their relationship with travel. We also believe that solo female travelling requires further attention, especially in regions such as the Middle East, where women's rights and related debates present some complexities.

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The authors have no conflicts of interest and contributed equally to the authorship of the article. The research is supported by the projects: 'Transformations of the historical urban landscape induced by tourism: contradictions and controversies, government and local governance' (CSO2016-75470-R) and "Over-tourism in Spanish coastal destinations. Tourism degrowth strategies. An approach from the social dimension" (RTI2018-094844-B-C33), both funded by the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities.

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