

Intersectionality and Female Solo Travel: Rethinking Motivations Amidst Conservative Gender Norms

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Abstract: Female solo travel has emerged as a significant sociocultural phenomenon, frequently associated with personal growth, independence, and empowerment. In contexts where gender norms and mobility rights are severely constrained, however, travel solo takes on additional meanings and constraints. In Iran, where Islamic regulations, entrenched patriarchal traditions, and political structures rigorously shape women's mobility, the motivations for solo travel are deeply interwoven with social identity and lived experience. Drawing on 52 interviews with 25 Iranian women conducted in Malaysia, supplemented by photo-elicitation and serial interviews, this research employs a constructivist grounded theory approach to uncover the fluid, context-specific nature of solo travel motivations. The findings distinguish between solo travel by default, driven by external circumstances such as work, education, or the absence of a companion, and solo travel by choice, motivated by aspirations for freedom, psychological well-being, and self-discovery. Participants often treated even brief periods of unaccompanied transit as meaningful, given expectations of accompaniment. By situating female solo travel within the socio-cultural and political landscapes of Iran, this research contributes to a more intersectional and context-sensitive understanding of women's mobility across Asia, highlighting how meanings attached to solo travel vary across social position and life stage.

Keywords: Female solo travel, Intersectionality, Iranian Muslim women, Mobility constraints

Female solo travel has emerged as a significant sociocultural phenomenon and is widely discussed in the literature as a practice associated with changing gender roles, women's participation in tourism, and the conceptualization of women's empowerment in relation to independence, self-discovery, and personal growth (Dresler, 2025; Hassan & Damir, 2022; Nikjoo et al., 2021). While existing research has largely focused on women with solo travel

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experience and their motivations (Alonso-Vazquez et al., 2024; Brown & Osman, 2017; Dresler, 2025; Maiurro & Brandão, 2025), women without solo travel experience and their potential motivations have received far less scholarly attention. Moreover, the literature remains geographically uneven, with most empirical evidence drawn from Western or selected Asian contexts (Alonso-Vazquez et al., 2024; Osman et al., 2020; Wilson & Little, 2008; Yang et al., 2018b). Consequently, limited research has examined how gendered cultural norms, religious values, and socio-political constraints shape women's motivations for solo travel, particularly among women with intersecting social identities (Chen et al., 2023; Gao & Kerstetter, 2016). Intersectionality foregrounds how multiple social positions are co-constituted and politically organized, producing uneven exposure to constraint and surveillance (Cho et al, 2013; Crenshaw, 1989).

From a practice perspective, insights into women's solo travel motivations are critical for destination managers, tourism planners, and non-governmental organizations seeking to design inclusive travel infrastructure and support mechanisms (Pitanatri et al., 2025). Context-sensitive knowledge of women's motivations, anxieties, and negotiation strategies can inform the provision of safety, information design, and capacity-building initiatives, particularly in destinations serving travelers from patriarchal or mobility-restricted societies. Such insights are increasingly emphasized in recent tourism research, which highlights the need for gender-responsive and inclusive planning to support women's mobility and well-being (Khoo et al., 2025; Nikjoo et al, 2021). Addressing these issues requires moving beyond stereotypical assumptions about female solo travelers and grounding tourism practice in women lived social realities.

From a feminist tourism perspective, scholars have increasingly called for context-sensitive and intersectional analyses of women's tourism experiences (Mooney, 2018; Nisha et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2022). This call reflects recognition that gender stereotypes, patriarchal structures, and social taboos surrounding women's roles in family life, mobility, and leisure profoundly influence women's solo travel experiences (Nikjoo et al., 2021; Wilson & Harris, 2006). Despite this growing body of work, little is known about women's solo travel motivations in Middle Eastern, Muslim-majority contexts, where both shared and diverse interpretations of Islam shape social, legal, and political structures that regulate everyday life and women's mobility (Cohen & Cohen, 2015; El-Sisi et al., 2025; Moghadam et al., 2009). These conditions significantly shape women's personal choices, notwithstanding global policy commitments to gender equality, including SDG (Abou-Shouk et al., 2021).

Iran provides a compelling context for examining women's motivations for solo travel. As home to the world's largest Shi'a Muslim population, the country is characterized by entrenched gender norms, restricted female mobility, and a pronounced gender gap (BBC News, 2013; Seyfi & Hall, 2019). Iranian women's leisure and travel decisions are shaped by a complex interplay of patriarchal traditions, regulations rooted in interpretations of Islamic values, economic pressures intensified by international sanctions, and the absence of robust legal protections (Bianchi & Stephenson, 2013; Kazemi, 2000; Seyfi et al., 2022). Reflecting these complex conditions, Rostami and Trupp (2025) argue that the intersection of factors such as gender, place of residence, religion, marital status, education, employment, nationality, age, and race can impose varying constraints on Iranian women's engagement in or contemplation of solo travel.

Nevertheless, although the constraints–effects–mitigation model (Crawford et al., 1991; Hubbard & Mannell, 2001; Jackson et al., 1993) emphasizes the dynamic relationship between motivation and constraints in facilitating leisure participation, emerging studies on Iranian women's solo travel have predominantly focused on constraints rather than motivations (Hosseini et al., 2022; Nematpour et al., 2024; Nikjoo et al., 2021; Zahedi Amiri, 2023). While these studies report a growing interest in solo travel among educated Iranian women, often interpreted as emerging strategies for negotiating constraints within restrictive contexts, they

largely lack an explicit intersectional analysis of how motivations are shaped by women's social identities. Drawing on the intersectional framework proposed by Rostami and Trupp (2025), this study analytically foregrounds the intersection of gender, religion, and nationality to examine how these intersecting positions shape women's motivations for solo travel within the Iranian context.

Against this backdrop, this study explores the motivations of Iranian Muslim women to contemplate or engage in solo travel, guided by an intersectional framework and the constraints-effects-mitigation model (Crawford et al., 1991; Hubbard & Mannell, 2001; Jackson et al., 1993). Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

- What motivates Iranian Muslim women to contemplate solo travel?
- How do intersecting social identities, such as gender, religion, and nationality, shape these motivations?
- How do Iran's socio-cultural, religious, and political contexts differentiate these motivations from those observed in other settings?

Beyond academic debates, examining Iranian women's motivations for solo travel carries important policy and practice implications. Women's mobility is increasingly recognized as a key dimension of gender equality and social inclusion, as reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment (Abou-Shouk et al., 2021; Pritchard, 2018). In restrictive sociopolitical contexts, understanding how women negotiate mobility constraints can inform gender-responsive tourism policies, safety initiatives, and rights-based interventions aimed at supporting women's autonomy and well-being.

By focusing on the intersection of gender, religion, and sociopolitical context, this research adopts an intersectional, context-sensitive approach to female solo travel motivations, a neglected domain in the tourism studies literature. The findings aim to contribute to academic discussions on gender and tourism, including debates around empowerment (Abou-Shouk et al., 2021; Pritchard, 2018) and inform policymakers, industry practitioners, and activists seeking inclusive travel frameworks aligned with sustainable development and social justice goals. Rather than presuming empowerment as an outcome, this study examines how meanings of empowerment emerge through women lived experiences of mobility negotiation.

Literature Review

This literature review synthesizes foundational and contemporary perspectives on tourism motivation, with a particular focus on female solo travel. It demonstrates how early motivation theories inform a deeper understanding of individuals' travel decision-making processes. The review also examines how feminist and intersectional approaches have expanded scholarly insights into women's travel experiences and critically considers how structural constraints and sociopolitical factors shape, and are negotiated within, female solo travel.

Tourism and Female Solo Travel Motivations

Motivation in tourism research has traditionally been conceptualized as a psychological stimulus that drives the desire to travel (Alonso-Vazquez et al., 2024; Mahika, 2011). Early motivation theorists (Dann, 1977; Crompton, 1979; Iso-Ahola, 1982) emphasized psychological drives such as escape, ego enhancement, and intrinsic stimulation. These foundational theories have informed subsequent research on travel decision-making (Lin & Zhang, 2021; Tseng et al., 2023), demonstrating that motivation is not an isolated construct but is shaped through interactions between individual dispositions and broader social structures

(Chiang & Jogaratnam, 2006; Mahika, 2011). In this regard, gender, age, social class, and nationality may modify and constrain tourists' desires and opportunities (Collins & Tisdell, 2002; Pritchard, 2018; Wang et al., 2025). Accordingly, leisure motivation should be understood not merely as an internal psychological state, but as a phenomenon embedded in power relations, cultural norms, and sociopolitical conditions.

Building on these foundational theories, one of the most widely used classifications in tourism research distinguishes between solo travel by default and solo travel by choice (Laesser et al., 2009; Yang et al., 2022). Solo travel by default occurs when individuals travel alone due to the absence or unavailability of companions (Mehmetoglu et al., 2001; Osman et al., 2020; Yang, 2021). In contrast, solo travel by choice is driven by personal motivations such as pleasure, novelty seeking, escape from routine, social interaction, and self-development (McNamara & Prideaux, 2010; Yang, 2021). Given the heterogeneous nature of solo travelers (Jonas, 2022), existing studies have identified a range of social (Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Zhang et al., 2024), cultural (Emekli et al., 2022; Osman et al., 2020), and psychological (Wilson & Harris, 2006; Teng et al., 2023) factors shaping solo travel motivations.

Feminist leisure scholarship has long argued that women's participation in leisure activities, including travel, can function as a form of resistance to gendered constraints and a means of reclaiming autonomy (Pritchard, 2018; Wilson & Harris, 2006; Wang et al., 2025). Prior studies suggest that women's motivations for solo travel often include a desire to demonstrate physical and emotional resilience, challenge stereotypes portraying women as vulnerable, and redefine dominant notions of femininity (Nikjoo et al., 2021; Seow & Brown, 2020). Given that solo travel frequently involves perceived safety risks (Chiang & Jogaratnam, 2006), overcoming fear and uncertainty is often framed as a form of empowerment (Wilson & Harris, 2006; Yang et al., 2019). Through navigating the challenges of solo travel, women may discover previously unrecognized strengths, contributing to enhanced self-awareness and personal growth (Osman et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2025). However, much of this literature lacks an intersectional lens that examines how women's social identities shape solo travel motivations, particularly in Muslim-majority societies characterized by patriarchal norms, such as Iran, where women are subject to compulsory dress codes and legal restrictions on mobility, including the requirement of spousal permission for passports and international travel (Khatam, 2023; Seyfi & Hall, 2019).

From Constraint–Effect–Mitigation to Intersectionality

The relationship between motivation, constraints, and negotiation aligns with the constraint–effect–mitigation model proposed by Hubbard and Mannell (2001), which conceptualizes leisure participation as the outcome of interactions among constraints, motivation, negotiation strategies, and participation. This framework builds on earlier work by Jackson et al. (1993), who argued that both the initiation and outcome of negotiation processes depend on the relative strength of, and interaction between, constraints and motivations for participation. Within the context of female solo travel, this model is particularly relevant, as prior research often frames empowerment as a potential outcome of negotiating constraints and engaging in solo travel experiences (Hassan & Damir, 2022; Wilson & Harris, 2006; Yang et al., 2023). Nevertheless, while the constraint–effect–mitigation model offers valuable insight into how individuals negotiate leisure constraints, it does not sufficiently account for intersecting social identities or the sociopolitical conditions that uniquely constrain women in patriarchal contexts (Rostami & Trupp, 2025).

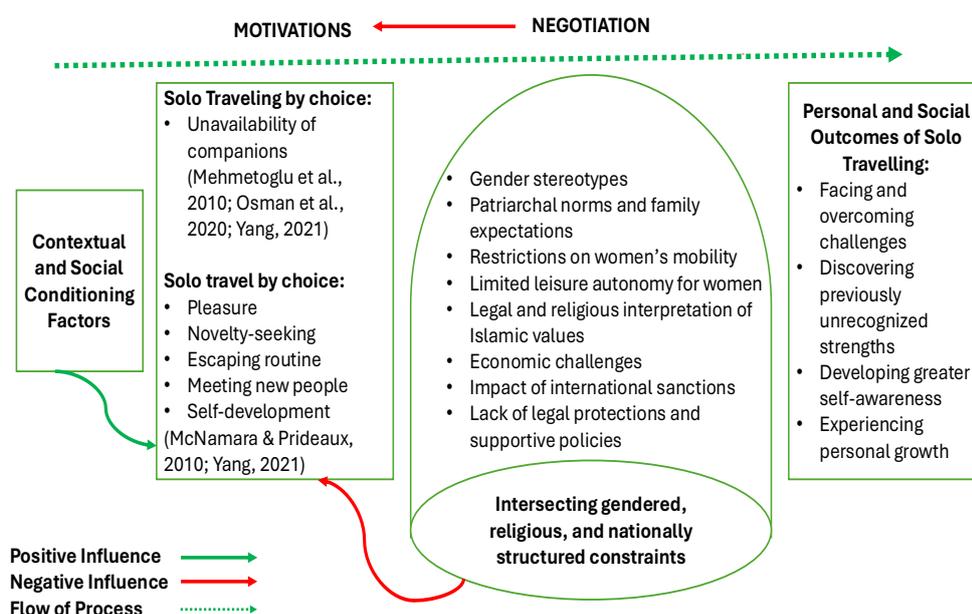
Responding to this limitation, a growing, though still limited, body of scholarship demonstrates that multi-axis intersectional analyses, such as gender and race (Yang et al., 2018a), gender and religion (Nisha et al., 2025), and gender, age, and nationality (Alonso-Vazquez et al., 2024; Gao & Kerstetter, 2016; Wang et al., 2025), are crucial for understanding

constraints on female solo travel. These studies highlight the dynamic and context-specific nature of inequality shaped by women’s social identities, which is often obscured in single-axis analyses (Butratana & Trupp, 2021; Cho et al., 2013). Building on this literature, Rostami and Trupp (2025) proposed an intersectional framework encompassing gender, religion, age, nationality, employment, education, marital status, place of residence, and race to explain constraints on solo travel among Iranian Muslim women.

Their framework suggests that while scholars such as Nisha et al. (2025) emphasize the intersection of gender and religion among Muslim women, the sociopolitical context and dominant interpretations of Islamic values further highlight the relevance of additional axes of identity. For example, although educated and employed women may demonstrate greater interest in solo travel (Hosseini et al., 2022; Nikjoo et al., 2021), marital status and husbands’ legal authority can restrict women’s mobility (Nematpour et al., 2024). Similarly, place of residence and ethnicity may limit access to outdoor and leisure activities due to social expectations and varying degrees of patriarchy (Mohammadi et al., 2025; Salehi et al., 2021; Tavakoli & Mura, 2021). Age and racialized perceptions of risk may further shape women’s experiences, particularly amid national and international political instability (Gao & Kerstetter, 2016; Wang et al., 2025). Moreover, women’s mobility rights have been further constrained by international sanctions and restrictive visa regimes linked to Iran’s nuclear program (Garon, 2023). Importantly, not all axes of identity operate with equal significance across empirical contexts. Given the strong influence of Iran’s sociopolitical environment and Islamic regulatory framework, this study focuses specifically on the intersection of gender, religion, and nationality to examine Iranian women’s solo travel motivations. While intersectionality serves as the primary theoretical framework, the constraint–effect–mitigation model is employed as a sensitizing lens to connect motivations with perceived and experienced constraints (Figure 1). In this study, intersectionality is used analytically to examine how gendered power is mediated through religious regulation and nationally structured mobility regimes in Iran. Other social positions (e.g., marital status, education, ethnicity, place of residence, age) are treated as contextual conditions that shape exposure to constraint and access to negotiation resources, rather than as parallel analytical axes.

Figure 1

Intersectional pathways to female solo travel (developed by the authors based on the literature)



Methodology

This study adopts an interpretive research philosophy, grounded in the assumption that meanings and motivations are socially constructed and context dependent (Jamal & Hollinshead, 2001). Given the limited knowledge of Iranian Muslim women's motivations for solo travel, particularly in relation to intersecting social and sociopolitical conditions, a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) was employed. This approach is well suited to exploring under-researched phenomena for which existing theories provide limited explanatory power. The study follows abductive analytic logic, involving iterative movement between empirical data and theoretical interpretation to achieve a situational fit between participants' accounts and emerging conceptual explanations (Charmaz, 2014; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Accordingly, an exploratory qualitative design was adopted, combining serial in-depth interviews with photo-elicitation to generate context-grounded insights into women's motivations.

Intersectionality serves as the primary analytical framework, guiding attention to how gendered power is mediated through religious regulation and nationally structured mobility constraints (Crenshaw, 1989; Rodriguez et al., 2016; Watson & Scraton, 2013). The constraints-effects-mitigation model (Crawford et al., 1991; Hubbard & Mannell, 2001; Jackson et al., 1993) is employed as a sensitizing lens to examine how motivations emerge and evolve through perceived constraints and negotiation practices. Together, these frameworks support an abductive analytic process that links women's motivations to context-specific dynamics, including patriarchal norms, religious regulation, and mobility restrictions shaped by national policy and international sanctions.

The research team's positionality informed both data generation and analysis. The first author and one co-author are Iranian Muslim women with lived experience of the sociocultural context under study. Their perspectives were balanced through collaborative analysis with two male European, non-Muslim co-authors, who contributed additional disciplinary and cultural viewpoints from tourism, hospitality, and human geography. Regular co-coding and analytic discussion supported reflexivity and interpretive robustness.

Data Collection

The study focuses on Iranian Muslim women who have lived under gendered mobility restrictions specific to Iran (Kazemi, 2000; Seyfi & Hall, 2019). To capture both active and dormant motivations, the study purposively sampled women with and without solo travel experience. Interviews were conducted with Iranian Muslim women temporarily residing in Malaysia, all of whom had lived in Iran until at least age 18 and held Iranian passports, thereby indicating that their mobility rights were shaped by Iranian law. Conducting fieldwork in Malaysia facilitated access to participants who were socialized within the Iranian context, while providing a setting conducive to open and reflective discussion. Initial participants were recruited through Iranian community networks and Telegram groups. As analysis progressed, theoretical sampling was used to refine the sample based on emerging conceptual categories, ensuring variation across age, marital status, ethnicity, education, occupation, and place of residence in line with an intersectional approach (Charmaz, 2014; Crenshaw, 2013; see Table 1).

Data was generated through serial semi-structured interviews combined with photo-elicitation. Participants were invited to share a travel-related photograph of a memorable travel experience, whether solo or non-solo, to serve as a prompt for reflection and discussion (Mattsson et al., 2023). Serial interviews (Read, 2018) enabled rapport-building, iterative exploration of motivations, and reflexive refinement of emerging themes over time, supporting progress toward theoretical saturation. While most participants took part in two interview

sessions, two participated in three sessions, and one declined a follow-up interview after the initial discussion.

Research Ethics Statement

This study was reviewed and approved by the Sunway University Research Ethics Committee under approval reference number PGSUREC2023/019 (approved on 14 April 2023). The research complied with institutional ethical guidelines for studies involving human participants. All participants were provided with a Participation Information Sheet detailing the purpose of the study, procedures, confidentiality measures, and their rights as research participants. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. All data were anonymised and treated confidentially (Saunders et al., 2020).

Table 1

Socio-demographic overview of the participants (n = 25). All participants were Iranian Muslim women residing in Malaysia at the time of the interview. Demographic categories are self-reported.

Social Identity	Category	Frequency	Social Identity	Category	Frequency
Age	19–29	9	Education	High School Dropout	1
	30–39	7		College Student	1
	40–49	5		Diploma	1
	50–59	3		Degree Student	3
	60–64	1		Bachelor’s Degree	6
Marital Status	Single	8	Work Experience	Master’s Degree	7
	Relationship	3		PhD	6
	Married	13		Full-time	12
	Divorced	1		Part-time	8
	Widow	1		Unemployed	5
Maternal Status	With Children	10	Residence	Small Cities (<100,000)	4
	Without Children	15		Medium Cities (>100,000–1,000,000)	4
				Large Cities (>1,000,000–5,000,000)	10
				Metropolitan Cities (>5,000,000)	7

Data Analysis

The analytical stages outlined here describe how categories were generated and integrated. Data were analyzed using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) concurrently with data collection. Following each interview, which was conducted in Farsi and subsequently transcribed and translated into English, data analysis commenced abductively. The process began with word-by-word and line-by-line coding of the transcripts

to generate initial codes that captured participants' emic perspectives on their motivations. As analysis progressed, initial codes were clustered into more abstract conceptual categories through focused coding. Although prior literature sensitized the analysis, categories were not pre-defined and were generated inductively through constant comparison across interviews.

Constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1968) guided the analytical process, whereby newly collected data were continuously compared with existing codes and categories to refine their properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). An abductive logic (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) enabled movement between data and theory, integrating insights from intersectionality and the constraints-effects-mitigation model. This iterative process deepened understanding of how Iranian women's multiple social identities intersect with sociopolitical structures to shape nuanced solo travel motivations. While some codes directly reflected motivational drivers, others revealed how women's social identities structured and conditioned those motivations (Cho et al., 2013).

Regular memo writing (Charmaz, 2014) documented analytic reflections, supported theoretical integration, and facilitated the assessment of saturation. After 42 interviews, no new conceptual properties or relationships relevant to the core category emerged, and subsequent interviews confirmed the robustness and integration of existing categories. Theoretical saturation was confirmed after 52 interviews with 25 participants, as the final five yielded no new conceptual insights regarding motivations. Of the 25 participants, 10 had solo travel experience, and 15 had not: among the latter group, seven reported knowing a female solo traveler within their social networks. The inclusion of women without solo travel experience was deliberate, addressing a gap in the literature that has predominantly focused on women who have already undertaken solo travel (Hosseini et al., 2022; Nematpour et al., 2024).

Trustworthiness, Reliability, and Validity

Trustworthiness was ensured through multiple strategies consistent with qualitative research standards (Tracy, 2010). Credibility was supported by prolonged engagement with participants through serial in-depth interviews, which facilitated rapport, trust, and more reflective accounts of motivation over time (Decrop, 2004). Data was analyzed iteratively using constructivist grounded theory principles, including constant comparison, reflexive memo writing, and repeated engagement with emerging categories, allowing concepts to be progressively refined (Charmaz, 2014). Dependability was addressed through a transparent, systematic analytical process, with coding decisions and category development documented across the four stages of analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Interpretive robustness was further strengthened through collaborative coding and regular analytic discussions among the research team, drawing on diverse positionalities and disciplinary perspectives to reduce individual analytical bias. NVivo 14 was used to support systematic organization and management of data.

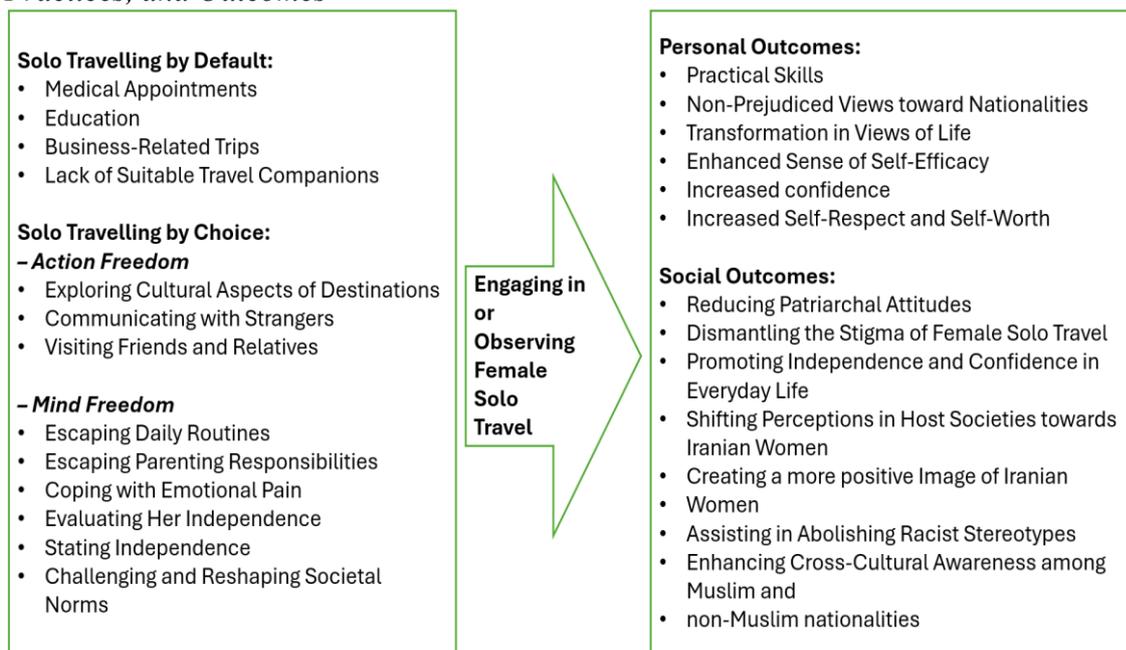
In terms of validity and generalisability, the study does not seek statistical generalisation. Instead, analytical transferability is supported by situating the findings within the specific legal, religious, and sociopolitical conditions shaping Iranian women's mobility. The diversity of the sample in terms of age, marital status, education, ethnicity, and place of residence further enhances robustness and supports analytical transferability to other patriarchal or mobility-restricted contexts where institutional, legal, and moral regimes produce similar patterns of surveillance, legitimacy, and constraint. (Polit & Beck, 2010).

Findings

Across interviews, motivations emerged through the interaction of gendered expectations, religious regulation, and nationally structured mobility constraints. The analysis generated a core category – solo travel as negotiated autonomy under intersecting sociopolitical constraints – which integrates women’s motivations, negotiation practices, and perceived outcomes across the data. This is further organized into two motivational pathways, solo travelling by default and solo travelling by choice, followed by outcomes participants associated with solo travel. In reporting empirical examples, we prioritize excerpts that clarify category properties and mechanisms, rather than treating quotations as illustrative color. Following constructivist grounded theory principles, categories were integrated through constant comparison to examine their relationships rather than treated as discrete themes. Motivational pathways (solo travelling by default and by choice) were analyzed in relation to the conditions under which they emerged, the negotiation strategies women employed, and the personal and social outcomes they described. This process-oriented integration of motivations, negotiated actions, and outcomes is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Mapping the Experience of Female Solo Travel: Motivations, Negotiation Practices, and Outcomes



Solo Travelling by Default

Solo travelling by default refers to situations where participants travelled alone due to circumstances rather than preference. These situations often involved non-leisure purposes such as medical appointments, education, or work-related trips. For instance, Vida described a solo journey from Malaysia to Iran to visit her doctor, with logistical support provided by friends there. Although medical needs often prompted travel, the analytically salient moment was frequently the liminal period of transit, where ‘being alone’ was experienced as socially exceptional under norms of accompaniment. However, participants described even brief periods of solo transit as significant, given their usual expectations of being accompanied. Similarly, while four participants mentioned business-related travel, Shohreh, a 44-year-old

from a small border city with Kurdish ethnicity, recalled her first solo trip and experience exploring a city alone as a university freshman, saying:

Shiraz was my first solo trip. I had no idea about Shiraz. It has been rare for girls to travel in my hometown; otherwise, they are students.

Conceptually, this account evidences a ‘legitimacy pathway’ in which education operates as a socially sanctioned warrant for unaccompanied mobility, revealing how motivation is enabled by institutionally acceptable rationales rather than individual preference. Several participants from smaller towns described solo travel as unusual or discouraged for women, with education framed as the most legitimate reason to travel independently. The presence of nine student participants aged 19 to 32 suggests that university participation also enabled mobility opportunities for younger women.

In contrast to the default motivations discussed earlier, some women cited a lack of suitable travel companions as a reason for solo travel. For example, Kimiya, in her 40s, explained that although she has close friends, she prefers travelling alone because all her friends are married, and “couples’ conflicts or their different desires can spoil the trip.” Travelling alone allowed her to fully enjoy the experience without compromising.

Solo Travelling by Choice

Solo travelling by choice referred to participants expressed preference to travel alone, most often for leisure, wellbeing, or personal interests. It reflects a genuine desire to travel alone for leisure. Participants described seeking two forms of freedom, action freedom and mind freedom, terms derived directly from the data rather than borrowed from existing literature.

Action Freedom

Action freedom refers to the ability to engage in activities without the constraints of time or companions. For many women, this includes a deeper appreciation of culture, especially historical sites. Sahar, a mother, admitted that if she were to travel alone, she would choose culturally rich destinations:

I prefer a place like Italy, maybe visiting Pompeii, for solo travel, I'd focus on history and culture more than entertainment.

Participants also expressed a desire to communicate with others during their travels. Lida enjoyed engaging with locals to immerse herself in the culture, while Sogoul preferred meeting other tourists, saying, “You can find them in hotel lobbies, cafés, dorms, and restaurants. I explored the city in Mexico in four days with a group I met in the hotel lobby.” Some participants also noted that solo travel was occasionally motivated by the pursuit of romantic relationships, often initiated through online platforms.

Beyond interactions with strangers, visiting friends and relatives was another key motivation, as many participants described travelling to both familiar and new destinations for this purpose. Several participants described valuing time alone while travelling precisely because it reduced everyday monitoring and expectations from accompanying family members. Parinaz, a 30-year-old single participant who enjoyed solo travel, shared:

When I was alone, I listened to music and slept. If my dad had been with me, he'd have made me read a book or something. Just this small freedom... it made me enjoy the trip more.

Parinaz’s account illustrates how being unaccompanied altered the kinds of everyday activities that felt possible during travel. Analytically, small freedom’ functions as a micro-practice of autonomy: the motivational charge comes from temporary suspension of familial supervision, not from leisure consumption per se.

Mind freedom

This category reflects psychological motivations, emphasizing women's need to reconnect with themselves and prioritize personal well-being to achieve mental renewal and build inner strength.

Employed participants and mothers often expressed a desire to escape daily routines and parenting responsibilities. Tannaz described shifting from a work-centered lifestyle with little recreation to one that included social activities and solo time in public spaces, such as cafés. Similarly, Lida emphasized the importance of personal space for parents to reflect and recharge:

We need time just for ourselves. Solo travel gives you time to think about your life, evaluate yourself, and come back relaxed and be a better parent.

Employed women and mothers often expressed stronger motivations to travel alone. For some participants, solo travel was a way to cope with emotional pain and recover from major life events, such as the death of a loved one, a breakup, or mental health struggles. Nazanin, for example, took a solo trip after her sister's death to a destination they had planned to visit together. She recalled:

I didn't go sightseeing. I just walked by the sea and came back. That peace helped me relieve myself and be comfortable.

This positions solo travel as an affective coping practice, where the desired outcome is psychic relief and emotional re-stabilization, and the motivational driver is the possibility of unmonitored withdrawal.

For others, solo travel was a way to evaluate or showcase their independence. Sogoul, whose family was "hypervigilant about safety," often drove alone to northern Iran without informing them, wanting to evaluate her independence and prove she could protect herself. Similarly, Elahm, who had left Iran at age 18 to pursue education in Malaysia, saw her solo journey as a statement of independence:

I have a supportive family, but there are certain taboos within my family, like it is dangerous for a girl to travel alone. This taboo felt imposed by society, and I was determined to prove it wrong.

While Elahm was already confident in her abilities, societal restrictions and her family's gendered views on female solo travel strengthened her resolve to challenge these norms and pursue education in Malaysia. Her goal was not only personal but also collective, aimed at challenging and reshaping the societal norms and demonstrating women's independence. Younger, single participants often sought independence and aimed to challenge patriarchal norms, while married participants emphasized the need for relaxation and rejuvenation to better fulfil their roles as mothers and partners after their travels.

Solo Travel Outcomes and Meaning-Making

Participants described outcomes they associated with travelling alone, including personal and social effects. We treat these as outcomes and meaning-attributions that follow from, and sometimes retroactively reshape, earlier motivations; they are not analyzed here as motivations in themselves.

Personal Outcomes

Participants highlighted the development of practical skills before and during solo travel, such as communication, navigation, budgeting, and planning, as key outcomes of solo travel. Lida noted, "Even searching for information about destinations before trips teaches you a lot." Activities such as sightseeing, cultural immersion, and interactions with people further

broaden women's understanding of the world, particularly of people from different nationalities. For example, Kimiya admitted that she previously avoided interactions with Afghans, associating them with terrorism. However, during her solo travels, she experienced similar prejudice as a Middle Eastern woman abroad. She faced negative reactions because of her international political associations with the Iranian government. Here, the outcome is a reframing of moral and political perception produced through transnational encounters, linking individual learning to the intersection of nationality and racialized stigma. More participants described the transformative impact of solo travel on their views of life and themselves. Nazanin shared a meaningful encounter with a woman during her trip to Thailand:

I was talking to a seller living with her two kids on a small boat. They came there every day to work, earning their living expenses on the same day. They were happy with whatever they earned and had. They did not look like us, always thinking about savings, cars, possessions, etc.

Similarly, facing and managing challenges during solo travel helped participants build confidence by recognizing their strengths and accepting their limitations. Sara, who had always feared solo travel, described a trip from Malaysia to Iran as an opportunity to confront her fears, including her anxiety about learning English:

I had to travel to Iran without my husband, so I was scared. Also, my weak understanding of English [. . .] After the trip, I came to see that I needed to learn it. Learning English doesn't seem so daunting anymore; I feel like I can handle it.

Successfully overcoming challenges without companions strengthened participants' sense of self-efficacy, which influenced various aspects of their lives. For instance, Agrin shared that her solo trip helped her overcome the fear of losing her parents and gave her the confidence to live alone. Other participants also resisted dominant cultural beliefs, such as the stigma attached to divorce and the idea that a woman's worth is tied to marriage. Mona, a 22-year-old participant, highlighted how solo travel can be empowering:

If a girl decides to travel alone and be independent, exploring the world, she'll notice that marriage isn't the only achievement in life. [. . .] Life isn't just about giving life to others; it's also about living for yourself.

Although Mona initially addressed single Iranian women and criticized the societal emphasis on marriage (Aghajanian et al., 2018), her remarks also speak to wider expectations that women prioritize caregiving over self-development. Her reflections suggest that through solo travel, women gain practical skills, expand their general knowledge, and improve their mental well-being. These intangible outcomes, such as increased confidence, self-respect, and recognition of their identity as women, ultimately foster a stronger sense of self-worth.

Social Outcomes

Participants indicated how visible examples of women travelling alone could shift how women's capabilities are talked about within families and communities. As Sanaz put it, "They see female solo travelers and stop saying you are weaker than boys, or these activities are for boys." Social media was frequently mentioned as a space where women could present solo travel as ordinary rather than stigmatized. Sara said:

Female solo travelers on Instagram show that they are not prostitutes. They're just going after what they want, if they want to travel somewhere without the necessity of traveling with a man (Aga Balasar).

Several participants referred to ripple effects within their own households. Zahra, for instance, reflected on the impact her solo travels had on other women in her family:

My mom and sisters used to count on their husbands for anything outside the house, but after seeing me travel, they felt inspired to start doing things on their own.

Some participants also discussed how being visibly Iranian abroad shaped how they felt they were perceived by others. Lida, for example, shared her experience of attending a course in a European country with her female colleague, alongside participants from various nationalities. She emphasized how the visible presence of Iranian women helped promote peace among ethnic groups and challenge the stereotype of Iranians as terrorists by offering a more nuanced and humanized representation:

Iranian women who travel alone can positively influence how people perceive Iranians in general, not just because they are female, but because they are Iranian. It shows the positive aspects of Iranian Muslims despite political issues.

This indicates a representational mechanism where mobility becomes a contested site of identity. At the same time, travel is valued for its capacity to disrupt geopolitical stereotyping as much as for personal experience.

Discussion

Across these narratives, solo travel was repeatedly framed as a way of negotiating limited autonomy under intersecting constraints. Figure 2 maps the experience of female solo travel as a process that begins with motivations, such as autonomy, resistance, or self-discovery, and leads to concrete actions like negotiating restrictions, traveling alone, or sharing experiences publicly. These actions are either directly engaged in by the women themselves or observed in others, serving as powerful examples that inspire further participation and normalize female mobility. Through this process, solo travel becomes not only a personally meaningful outcome but also a socially significant act that can shift cultural expectations and gender norms. Analytically, motivations are treated as antecedent orientations, negotiation practices as mediating actions, and ‘achievements’ as outcomes and publicly narrated meanings that may feed back into subsequent motivation.

This study shows that Iranian Muslim women’s motivations for solo travel are relational and embedded in sociopolitical and cultural contexts. Rather than operating as stable individual preferences, motivations are shaped and reconfigured through intersecting systems of gendered power, religious regulation, and nationally structured mobility constraints. While classic tourism motivation theories emphasize intrinsic and extrinsic drivers such as autonomy, learning, escape, and psychological well-being (Hatipoğlu, 2025; Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977; Pearce & Lee, 2005), the present findings show that these motivations are neither universal nor context neutral. By applying an intersectional lens alongside the constraints–effects–mitigation model, this study extends existing understandings of solo travel motivations beyond individualistic explanations and foregrounds the structural conditions under which motivations emerge.

Negotiating Motivations in a Restrictive Sociopolitical Context

Previous research on female solo travel has consistently highlighted motivations such as personal growth, freedom, escape from routine, and cultural exploration (Chiang & Jogaratnam, 2006; Wilson & Harris, 2006; Yang et al., 2019). The present study confirms the relevance of these motivations but demonstrates that, in the Iranian context, they are reworked through conditions of constraint rather than abundance. A key finding of this research is the identification of “solo travelling by default” as a motivation pathway shaped by necessity rather than preference. Unlike dominant Western narratives that frame solo travel as a deliberate

lifestyle choice (Jordan & Gibson, 2005; McNamara & Prideaux, 2010), Iranian women's initial solo travel often arises from obligations related to education, employment, healthcare, or family circumstances.

These findings extend earlier studies on Iranian women's travel, which have focused primarily on constraints (Hosseini et al., 2022; Nematpour et al., 2024), by demonstrating how constraints themselves can generate motivational momentum. Travelling alone for pragmatic reasons frequently requires women to enter public and transnational spaces traditionally regulated by male authority. Even when not freely chosen, such experiences disrupt dominant gender norms and can initiate a re-evaluation of women's perceived capabilities. In this sense, "default" solo travel functions as a structurally induced entry point into independent mobility, challenging the assumption that empowerment-oriented motivations must precede action.

In contrast, "solo travelling by choice" aligns more closely with motivations identified in other cultural settings, including psychological well-being, cultural immersion, and self-fulfillment (Ejupi & Medaric, 2022; Osman et al., 2020; Huynh Le Anh, 2026). However, in the Iranian context, these motivations acquire additional political and symbolic significance. Participants' desire for "action freedom" (the ability to choose activities, pace, and social interactions) and "mind freedom" (psychological relief, reflection, and emotional recovery) reflects not only leisure preferences but also a temporary suspension of patriarchal surveillance. Even mundane activities listening to music, walking alone, sitting in cafés become meaningful acts when they are otherwise regulated within family and social structures. Parinaz's emphasis on "just this small freedom" captures how minor practices become salient when family accompaniment is experienced as continuous supervision. This finding complicates leisure-based interpretations of solo travel by highlighting how motivations are socially produced through constraint.

Empowerment Through Preparation, Practice, and Motivational Evolution

This section highlights that empowerment does not reside solely in the act of solo travel but can emerge through preparatory and anticipatory practices. Empowerment did not emerge as a stable or universal outcome of solo travel but as a situational, uneven, and sometimes fragile process shaped by ongoing negotiation with family expectations, legal constraints, and moral surveillance. Consistent with the constraints-effects-mitigation model (Jackson et al., 1993; Hubbard & Mannell, 2001), women's engagement in planning, researching destinations, securing documentation, and negotiating permission constitutes a form of agency even when travel does not ultimately occur. In a context where men are culturally positioned as responsible for navigation, logistics, and public engagement, such preparatory practices represent a reallocation of gendered competencies.

This finding extends prior work that has framed empowerment as an outcome of travel participation (Nikjoo et al., 2021; Wilson & Harris, 2006; Yang et al., 2019) by showing that empowerment can precede and enable participation. However, empowerment through preparation is unevenly distributed. For several Kurdish and Lur participants, university admission represented the only socially legitimate pathway to independent travel, reflecting how ethnic marginalization intersects with gendered mobility restrictions (Mohammadi et al., 2022; Shakiba et al., 2021). Class differences were less explicitly articulated, suggesting that educational capital may now mediate access to mobility more strongly than inherited economic status in urban Iranian contexts (Sadeghi & Moruzzi, 2006).

Importantly, the findings reveal that motivations evolve over time. Initial necessity-driven travel often gives rise to newly articulated desires for autonomy and self-development. Women who first travelled alone for education or work subsequently reframed solo travel as a deliberate strategy for psychological well-being, self-evaluation, and resistance to gendered expectations. This supports and extends research suggesting that travel motivations are

cumulative and adaptive rather than fixed (Karl et al., 2020; Maiurro & Brandão, 2025; Seow & Brown, 2020; Pitanatri et al., 2025). It also challenges linear push–pull models by demonstrating that constraints can function as generative forces rather than purely inhibitory factors.

Intersectional Dimensions of Motivation Formation

Recent intersectional research demonstrates how race, gender, and class interact multiplicatively rather than additively in shaping lived experiences of discrimination (Yang & Henderson, 2024). Extending this insight, the present study moves beyond treating intersectionality as a listing of social identities (Rostami & Trupp, 2025) and instead examines how intersecting structures of power generate distinct motivational mechanisms for Iranian Muslim women’s solo travel.

Gender operates as the primary axis of regulation, but its effects are mediated through religious norms and nationally structured mobility regimes that shape what forms of movement are considered legitimate, risky, or transgressive. One key mechanism concerns legitimacy. For many participants, education, employment, or medical travel functioned as socially acceptable justifications for travelling alone, reflecting how gendered expectations of modesty and dependency are filtered through religious morality and family surveillance. In this context, motivations for solo travel often emerge not as leisure aspirations but as by-products of structurally sanctioned mobility.

A second mechanism relates to surveillance and supervision. The intersection of gender and religiously informed family norms – as recently also highlighted by Nisha et al (2025) – produced expectations of accompaniment that rendered even short periods of unaccompanied movement meaningful. Participants’ emphasis on “small freedoms” illustrates how motivation is shaped by the intensity of everyday monitoring rather than by abstract desires for independence. Here, solo travel motivations were not oriented towards escape alone, but towards the temporary suspension of supervision and moral accountability.

A third mechanism operates at the intersection of gender and nationality in transnational contexts. Participants’ accounts show how being visibly Iranian and Muslim abroad shaped motivations linked to representation and stigma management. Solo travel was sometimes framed as an opportunity to counter racialized and geopolitical stereotypes, transforming mobility into a symbolic act of identity negotiation. These mechanisms demonstrate that motivations for solo travel are not simply individual preferences but are shaped by the interplay of gendered power, religious regulation, and national mobility constraints. Intersectionality thus explains how motivation itself is structured by unequal access to legitimacy, autonomy, and recognition within gendered, religious, and nationally defined mobility regimes.

Building on these intersectional mechanisms, the findings show how women’s motivations vary depending on how legitimacy, surveillance, and mobility rights are negotiated across different life stages and social contexts. They are produced through the intersection of gender with religious regulation and nationally structured mobility constraints, while factors such as education, marital status, ethnicity, and place of residence condition how these constraints are encountered and negotiated across life stages and locations. In particular, education and employment functioned as legitimate routes into mobility, but their motivational force was conditioned by ethnicity and place of residence, especially where patriarchal control was more locally entrenched. Iran’s contemporary history plays a crucial role in shaping these intersections. While patriarchy predates the Islamic Republic (Moghadam, 2009), post-1979 legal structures intensified gendered control over women’s mobility, including spousal permission requirements for passports and travel (Seyfi & Hall, 2019; Hosseini et al., 2022; Özdemir & Polat, 2024). Simultaneously, post-revolutionary expansion of women’s education

created a generation of highly educated women whose aspirations exceeded the mobility afforded to them (Rezaie et al., 2017; Sadeghi & Moruzzi, 2006).

As a result, educational aspirations emerge as a central motivational driver, particularly for women from rural areas and ethnic minorities where patriarchal norms are more rigid (Salehi et al., 2021). Younger, single women frequently framed solo travel as a means of asserting independence and challenging normative life scripts centered on marriage, while married mothers emphasized psychological restoration and emotional resilience to better fulfil caregiving roles. These findings confirm feminist leisure scholarship that situates women's motivations within intersecting social positions (Adib & Guerrier, 2003; Collins & Tisdell, 2002; Son et al., 2008), while extending it by illustrating how motivations shift across life stages and social roles.

Participants' accounts also highlight how nationality and religious identity intersect with gender in transnational contexts, shaping motivations for solo travel. For some women, being visibly Iranian and Muslim abroad carried representational significance, with solo travel framed as an opportunity to counter racialized and geopolitical stereotypes and to assert alternative narratives of identity. In this sense, mobility operated not only as a personal practice of autonomy but also as a symbolic intervention in broader cultural imaginaries shaped by stigma, surveillance, and international politics. These dynamics further underline that motivations for solo travel are embedded in relations of recognition and misrecognition that extend beyond the domestic sphere.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Iranian Muslim women's motivations for solo travel are not fixed individual preferences but are formed through ongoing negotiation with patriarchal family structures, religious regulation, and nationally defined mobility constraints. Using an intersectional and context-sensitive approach, the analysis identified two interrelated motivational pathways. Solo travelling by default captures situations in which women travel alone due to necessity—such as education, work, healthcare, or the absence of companions—where even brief periods of unaccompanied movement are experienced as meaningful. Solo travelling by choice reflects later-stage motivations oriented towards autonomy, psychological well-being, and self-directed travel. Across both pathways, necessity-driven mobility often evolved into consciously articulated aspirations for independence and self-development.

Theoretical Contribution

Conceptually, this study reframes solo travel motivation as a process of negotiated autonomy shaped through constraint, rather than as a stable set of individual drivers. The findings demonstrate that constraint does not merely suppress motivation but can actively generate it. In restrictive contexts, the experience of negotiating permission, safety, and legitimacy can itself produce motivational momentum towards independent mobility. This challenges dominant leisure-based and Western-centric models that conceptualize solo travel primarily as a matter of choice, abundance, and individual preference.

By integrating intersectionality as the primary analytical framework with the constraints-effects-mitigation model as a sensitizing lens, the study extends existing theories of tourism motivation and empowerment in three ways. First, it shows that motivations are relational and context dependent, emerging through intersecting systems of gendered power, religious regulation, and nationally structured mobility regimes. Second, it demonstrates that empowerment is not an assumed outcome of travel participation but an uneven, processual, and sometimes fragile achievement that can emerge through preparation, anticipation, and negotiation—even when travel does not ultimately occur. Third, it highlights how motivations

evolve over time, supporting a dynamic understanding of motivation formation that challenges linear push–pull models and static conceptions of agency.

Although empirically grounded in the Iranian context, this processual and intersectional understanding of motivation is most likely to be analytically transferable to contexts with comparable configurations of gendered mobility regulation, religious or moral governance, and nationally structured constraints on women’s movement. We therefore position the framework as a sensitizing resource for comparison, rather than a general model applicable across all settings.

Practical Implications

The findings suggest that supporting women’s mobility in restrictive sociopolitical contexts requires interventions that address both material and symbolic barriers to independent travel. Rather than focusing solely on risk reduction, initiatives should recognize how autonomy is negotiated through everyday practices of planning, visibility, and legitimacy.

- Improve the safety and legibility of transport and accommodation environments used by women travelling alone, particularly in settings where mobility is socially and morally regulated.
- Provide accessible and multilingual travel information and planning resources that reduce women’s reliance on family members or institutional gatekeepers.
- Support travel planning and digital literacy initiatives, especially in provincial, rural, or marginalized settings where access to informal support networks may be limited.
- Address stigma alongside safety by increasing the visibility and normalization of women’s independent mobility through educational, cultural, and community-based initiatives.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations that suggest directions for future research. Empirically, the sample is limited to Iranian Muslim women residing temporarily in Malaysia, which constrains generalization. While the study does not aim for statistical generalization, comparative research across other Muslim-majority, patriarchal, or politically constrained contexts would help assess the analytical transferability of the motivational pathways identified here.

In addition, study captures motivation at a particular point in time. Longitudinal research could examine how motivations evolve across the life course and how outcomes such as increased confidence, shifts in family dynamics, or changing sociopolitical conditions feed back into future mobility decisions. Finally, future research could explore how women’s travel motivations intersect with broader social and political movements related to gender equality, rights, and mobility justice, further clarifying both the transformative potential and the limits of travel in restrictive settings.

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Author Contributions

Afsaneh Rostami conceptualized the study, conducted the literature review, developed the methodology, analyzed the data, and prepared the original draft of the manuscript. Gary Daniels, Alexander Trupp, and Kamelia Chaichi contributed to the writing of the discussion and conclusion sections and critically reviewed and revised the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines and approved by the Sunway University Research Ethics Committee (approval reference number PGSUREC2023/019, approved on 14 April 2023).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the interviews, and they were informed of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are stored in the institutional OneDrive account associated with the first author, which is provided by Sunway University. The data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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