

**Socio-Cultural Challenges to Women's Solo Domestic Travel Pursuits: A Mini-Ethnographic Case
of Iranian Culture**

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چالش‌های فرهنگی-اجتماعی برای سفرهای انفرادی داخلی زنان: موردی مینی قوم‌نگاری فرهنگ ایرانی

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Abstract

This qualitative mini-ethnographic case study aimed to explore and document the challenges and limitations of domestic solo travel for Muslim Iranian women, focusing on the role of family and friends in the actualization of their trip. Using thematic analysis, the study examines the socio-cultural aspects that limit solo travel, the travel decision-making process for women who travel solo, and the empowering aspects of solo leisure travel. The research question addressed is the role of family and friends in Iranian women's solo domestic travel actualization. The study found that solo travel for women in Iran is restricted by various socio-cultural aspects, including collectivist culture, safety concerns, patriarchal norms, and religious beliefs. Family support and financial affordability play significant roles in the decision-making process. The study provides insights into the challenges faced by women who choose to travel alone and the importance of financial independence and budgeting skills for female travelers. The study's unique contribution lies in its focus on women's solo travel in Iran and its examination of the socio-cultural aspects that limit solo travel for women. The study's practical guidance for policymakers and stakeholders interested in promoting women's empowerment in Iran and other collectivist societies makes it a significant contribution to the literature.

Key words: solo travel, Muslim women, leisure, collectivist society, friends and relatives

چکیده

این مطالعه موردی مینی قوم‌نگاری کیفی با هدف بررسی و مستندسازی چالش‌ها و محدودیت‌های سفر انفرادی داخلی برای زنان مسلمان ایرانی با تمرکز بر نقش خانواده و دوستان در تحقق سفر آنها انجام شد. این مطالعه با استفاده از تحلیل موضوعی، جنبه‌های اجتماعی-فرهنگی را که سفر انفرادی را محدود می‌کند، فرآیند تصمیم‌گیری در سفر برای زنانی که سفر انفرادی سفر می‌کنند، و جنبه‌های توانمندسازی سفرهای تفریحی انفرادی را بررسی می‌کند. سوال پژوهشی که به آن پرداخته شد، نقش خانواده و دوستان در تحقق سفرهای داخلی انفرادی زنان ایرانی است. این مطالعه نشان داد که سفر انفرادی زنان در ایران به دلیل جنبه‌های اجتماعی-فرهنگی مختلف از جمله فرهنگ جمع‌گرایانه، نگرانی‌های ایمنی، هنجارهای مردسالارانه و اعتقادات مذهبی محدود شده است. حمایت خانواده و استطاعت مالی نقش مهمی در فرآیند تصمیم‌گیری دارد. این مطالعه بینش‌هایی را در مورد چالش‌های پیش روی زنانی که به تنهایی سفر می‌کنند و اهمیت استقلال مالی و مهارت‌های بودجه‌بندی برای مسافران زن را ارائه می‌دهد. سهم منحصر به فرد این مطالعه در تمرکز آن بر سفر انفرادی زنان در ایران و بررسی جنبه‌های اجتماعی-فرهنگی است که سفر انفرادی را برای زنان محدود می‌کند. راهنمای عملی این مطالعه برای سیاست‌گذاران و ذینفعان علاقه‌مند به ارتقای توانمندی زنان در ایران و سایر جوامع جمع‌گرا کمک قابل توجهی به ادبیات ارائه می‌کند.

کلمات کلیدی: سفر انفرادی، زنان مسلمان، اوقات فراغت، جامعه جمع‌گرا، دوستان و اقوام

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Dedication

To the beautiful soul of my father,

This thesis is dedicated to you with the utmost love and reverence. You were there with me from the very beginning, and I would not have made it to this point without your unwavering support, encouragement, and guidance. As I embarked on this academic journey, you were there every step of the way. You provided me with guidance, motivation, and support, even when the going got tough. You believed in me when I doubted myself and pushed me to excel beyond my limits. I am forever grateful for everything you have done for me, and I hope that this thesis will serve as a tribute to your life and legacy. I will always cherish the memories we shared and the lessons you taught me.

Rest in peace, Baba Ghavam.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The act of travel is often associated with adventure, relaxation, and exploration of new destinations. However, research suggests that travel is more than just a means of escaping routine or satisfying curiosity; it is a behavior that can profoundly impact one's consciousness and sense of self. As Lew (2018) argues, travel is an approach to personal growth and development, compelling travelers to expand their thoughts and establish new connections with the world around them. Small (2016) further emphasizes that travel enables individuals to engage with different content and contexts, both internally and externally, transforming their perspectives of time, space, and social relationships. Boone et al. (2013) assert that these changes in consciousness occur naturally through travel and can significantly impact an individual's self-identity and worldview. Thus, while many travelers may be unaware of the transformative effects of their journeys, the act of travel inevitably alters and enhances one's consciousness.

In recent years, there has been a significant rise in the number of individuals who travel solo. As Mehmetoglu et al. (2001) note, solo travel can be a choice or a default option for many tourists. By-default solo travelers often opt to travel alone because they do not have the opportunity to travel with friends or family, while by-choice solo travelers have no preference for traveling with others. According to Travelport (2019), approximately 18% of global travel bookings are estimated to belong to solo travelers, and this trend is appealing to both men and women from every generation. The growth of solo travel is particularly attributed to female solo travelers, who have helped pave the way for this process (Wilson & Harris, 2006). Women are increasingly participating in travel and are recognized as a growing force in tourism (Paris & Teye, 2010; Pung et al., 2020; Seow & Brown, 2018). Despite potential challenges, such as safety concerns and

social isolation, the benefits of solo travel, such as increased confidence, personal growth, and the freedom to explore at one's own pace, have attracted more and more individuals to embark on solo journeys.

Solo travel is not without its challenges, but the benefits of embarking on a journey alone can be numerous. Heimtun and Abelsen (2013) note that solo travelers often benefit from more flexible planning and greater freedom in choosing their destinations. In addition, research has shown that solo travel can have positive impacts on mental health, providing a sense of relief and personal growth (Nikjoo et al., 2021; Poopale Ratthinan & Selamat, 2018). Women, in particular, have diverse reasons for traveling solo, ranging from cultural exploration to developing their sense of autonomy and independence (Chiang & Jogaratnam, 2006). Bianchi (2016) and Mannell (2005) argue that solo travel can provide women with opportunities to build confidence and reconnect with their inner selves. Despite these benefits, solo travel can also present significant challenges for women tourists, such as safety concerns and social isolation (Chiang & Jogaratnam, 2006). However, despite these challenges, solo travel remains a popular trend, especially among women.

While solo travel can be a liberating and empowering experience for many women, it is also accompanied by unique challenges and risks. Women traveling alone may face a range of obstacles related to culture, safety, and social norms. For example, women may be subject to harassment or violence in certain destinations or may face cultural barriers that limit their ability to fully experience a new place. Additionally, women may face social stigma or judgement for traveling alone, as solo travel is still viewed by some as a deviation from expected gender roles and societal norms (Shahvali et al., 2016). These factors can make solo travel a more difficult and intimidating experience for women, especially those who are less experienced or less confident in their ability to navigate unfamiliar situations. However, with careful planning and preparation,

many women are able to successfully navigate these challenges and enjoy the many benefits of solo travel.

Despite the many benefits of solo travel, there are also potential obstacles that may discourage or prevent women from traveling alone. Solo travel can be accompanied by culture-induced obstacles and social and/or psychological risks (Wantono & McKercher, 2020). Crawford and Godbey (1987) identified three categories of leisure constraints: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. Intrapersonal limitations include individual psychological states and elemental characteristics that influence preference and lead to non-participation rather than interfering between preference and participation. Intrapersonal constraints are somewhat unstable and can change in a short period of time. Examples of intrapersonal constraints to solo travel include considering travel as a danger, lack of self-confidence, fear of the unknown, concerns about safety, not interested in activities at the destination, and not interested in traveling to the destination. Women may be more likely to experience intrapersonal constraints related to solo travel due to societal expectations around gender roles, risk-taking, and independence (Crawford & Godbey, 1987).

Interpersonal constraints are social or relational factors that can discourage or prevent women from traveling alone. These constraints may include worries about how family or friends will react, or a lack of support for solo travel. Women may face more interpersonal constraints than men due to societal norms and expectations around gender and travel. These constraints can arise from interactions with others or external agencies, such as when there is no one to travel with, family and friends are uninterested or unsupportive, or solo travel is not perceived as enjoyable. These constraints can change throughout different life stages and are influenced by factors such as marital status and family size. Unlike intrapersonal constraints, interpersonal constraints are linked

to both inclinations and participation. Structural limitations refer to physical and demographic factors that can affect one's ability to engage in a particular activity, in this case, solo travel. In other words, structural constraints are external factors that can limit women's ability to travel alone, such as financial constraints, lack of access to transportation or accommodations, or legal restrictions. Due to gendered differences in access to resources and opportunities, women may be more likely to experience structural constraints related to solo travel (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). The three categories of leisure constraints identified by Crawford and Godbey can help understand the barriers that women may encounter when considering solo travel.

Interpersonal constraints are particularly prevalent in Iran, where social and religious impositions reinforce these challenges. As the second largest country in the Middle East region located in West Asia, Iran has an official religion of Shia Islam declared in its constitution, alongside a rich history of ten thousand years of civilization. According to Javidan and Dastmalchian (2003), Iranian culture places great importance on loyalty and cohesion towards small groups, such as family and close friends. Accordingly, being a part of a family and close group of friends is highly valued, and family members, relatives, and close friends have expectations of one another that they hope will be fulfilled.

1.2 The Problem

According to Chiang and Jogaratnam (2006), research on solo leisure travel has identified a wide range of motivations, from the physical characteristics of tourist destinations to psychological motivations such as escape and exploration, self-development, social interaction, excitement, and relaxation. In addition, important factors specifying motivation includes the concept of participation, the perceived importance of an activity in terms of self-improvement,

ego, role fulfillment, and responding to the perceived needs of significant others (Chiang & Jogaratnam, 2006).

Iran is considered a collectivist society where individuals rely on their social networks as a cultural reference in life and living. Hence, it is quite commonplace for women to inform/consult their close associates, such as family and friends, about their decision to travel independently to seek their consent and support (Moghadam et al., 2009). Therefore, social interactions become very crucial to the decision-making process and realization of solo travels of Iranian Muslim women. However, because it is uncommon for women to travel solo, it triggers diverse reactions from their immediate social network of friends and relatives (Yeganeh, 2015). In a collectivist culture such as Iran, depending on a person's family relationships (supports, responsibilities and expected duties), family members can influence a person's inclination and/or decision to travel solo (Nyaupane & Andereck, 2007). Similarly, friends and relatives are also known to both frustrate and encourage women who intend to travel solo (Yang & Tung, 2017). Additionally, the significance and/or the role of family and friends in solo travels among women in Muslim culture(s), specifically Iran, is evidently an understudied and underrepresented theme in tourism literature. In particular, societal and cultural challenges originate from a diverse range of contexts and assumptions that are crucial for informing the study.

It seems that solo traveling has been following the same global growth trend. Young Iranian women are increasingly traveling nationally and internationally despite obstacles that are not similar to the barriers women have to overcome in other parts of the world (Moghadam et al., 2009). Considering the relevance of solo travel to women's self-growth, impeding solo travel of/among women could result in various psychological consequences, such as the risk of social

rejection and anxiety disorders (Karagöz et al., 2021). A variety of factors play a role in the problem as well as how it impacts Iranian women and other populations.

1.2.1 Background to the Problem

Travel, whether for leisure or other purposes, requires individuals to plan and prepare for their trip in advance, including consulting, organizing for their absence, making arrangements for when and where they are going, and deciding on the details of their travel needs as well as possible activities at the destination. The literature indicates that all travelers go through specific phases of travel. According to Razavizadeh and Baradaran Kashani (2018), these phases are before the travel (pre), during the travel (peri) and after the travel (post). Socio-religious, personal, and experiential challenges influence the creation of obstacles before, during and after the trip and, as a result, how to actualize it. For Iranian women more than others, these obstacles make it difficult or impossible to travel alone (Hosseini et al. 2021).

Given the many aforementioned restrictions on female travel, the opportunity and ability for women to travel is different from that for men. Limitations tend to hinder women's ability to participate in activities of their choice to spend more time in those activities or to achieve and enjoy high levels of satisfaction (Paris & Teye, 2010). Intrapersonal constraints such as fear for personal safety and feelings of weakness and vulnerability seem to be felt more by women when they participate in leisure and outdoor activities (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007; Tavakoli & Mura, 2015). These concerns are significant reasons that explain Muslim women's hesitation to travel alone (Karagöz et al., 2020).

In the past fifty years since the Iranian revolution, the position of women has been debilitated by hegemonic masculinity in Iranian patriarchal Muslim society (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003). The Iranian government machinery seeks to control all aspects of women's lives. They believe that

women's lifestyle should be in accordance with Islamic regulations and therefore women should be protected by men (Tavakoli & Mura, 2017). Men tend to occupy positions of power. Thus, permitting them to be sole decision makers for themselves and their families (Moghadam et al., 2009). The entrenchment of patriarchal dominance is legitimized by religious dogma. Consequent socio-religious norms impose a barrier for aspiring women travelers. Women's freedom is limited, as they are obliged by law to obey their fathers or husband. Since various aspects of life in Iran are interwoven with Islamic religion (Moghadam et al., 2009), femininity and gender issues are seen through the lens of Islamic gender relations for a large percentage of Iranians, which contrasts with secular feminist movements (Dalaman, 2021). Thus, women are defined as the weaker gender that needs to be supported by men as their guardians (Nikjoo et al., 2021). In the Islamic world, although many women have the desire to travel for leisure, despite all the restrictions, only a few among them are able to actualize solo travels as their prerogative (Oktadiana et al., 2020).

1.2.2 Focus of the study

Although women solo travelers may want to embark on a trip alone, they still have to overcome several constraints that often arise from their family's concerns, as the family is an important influencer that can affect their travel decision in Iranian society (Yang & Tung, 2018). The ensuing conversations that occur between family members and the individual as well as the friends and individual are crucial parts of the decision-making process and can become a make-or-break situation for the actualization of travel. Since social interactions are the focus of this investigation, this study intends to explore the influences of kith and kin in the decision-making process. Subsequently, this decision-making process extends itself to the pre-, peri- and post-travel experiences of the woman solo traveler. Therefore, challenges could be expected to reveal themselves when exploring the interactions and the experiences from the perspective of Iranian

women solo travelers. Exploring the interactions among the potential solo travelers, their family, and friends as well as experiences and challenges of women solo travel in Iranian culture could potentially offer insights into the problem towards unveiling initial measures for mitigation. In this regard, the role of family and friends is significant albeit lacking adequate scholarly attention.

In this study, the attempt is to understand the significance of friends and family in influencing solo travels among Muslim women in Iran. This report addresses the need to study solo travel among Muslim women in Iran by exploring the inherent and/or obvious socio-cultural constraints or the obstacles. To that end, then, the outcomes of undertaking and/or overcoming personal, interpersonal, and systemic challenges of solo travel by Muslim women will be identified and explored. Secondly, the study affirms the influential role that friends and family of Muslim Iranian households play in supporting or discouraging their women to travel solo for leisure purposes. Subsequently, such an exploration affords some possible directions for facilitating gendered travel of a specified ethno-cultural society.

1.2.3 Assumptions of the study

Based on the above synopsis of the literature, the following assumptions can be enlisted as being relevant for this study:

- Many women in the Islamic world, including Iran, aspire to travel alone for leisure (Oktadiana et al., 2020).
- Young Muslim women are not allowed to travel alone in the Islamic world (Jamal & El-Bassiouny, 2018) and by that token, Iran.
- Many Muslim women hesitate to travel alone (Karagöz et al., 2020).
- Due to socio-cultural prejudices and pressures, Muslim families are reluctant to allow women to travel alone for leisure (Jamal & El-Bassiouny, 2018).

- An Iranian woman must seek permission from her family/husband before any solo travel to receive support (Moghadam et al., 2009; Shafaghi et al., 2012).
- Socio-cultural norms inhibit aspiring Muslim / Iranian women to travel solo (Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010).
- In Islamic countries, women are defined as the weaker gender that needs to be supported by men as their guardians (Eger, 2020; Nikjoo et al., 2021).
- Relatively few Iranian women travel solo despite social constraints (Oktadiana et al., 2020).
- Solo travel makes women feel independent and autonomous, which can be an agency of self-growth (Bianchi, 2016; Mannell, 2005).

The above assumptions are rooted in the available literature and the main concepts associated with the topic. These assumptions guided the researcher throughout the study and assisted in identifying the study's approaches.

1.2.4 Statement of the Problem

This mini-ethnographic case study aims to identify the personal, interpersonal, and systemic challenges faced by Iranian Muslim women who travel alone for leisure, as well as to explore the specific concerns related to women's solo travel within the collectivist culture of Iranian Muslims. The ultimate goal is to suggest possible ways to facilitate solo travels of Muslim Iranian women. The study seeks to examine the enactment of gender beliefs within the social relational contexts of a collectivist culture by exploring the narratives of solo female travelers and their close associates. While domestic travel is more feasible for Muslim Iranian women than international travel (Hall et al., 2023), the focus of the study is on Iranian women who express

autonomy through solo leisure travels within their country. These women are presumed to challenge cultural norms and reproduce the gender system within Iranian society.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this mini ethnographic case study is to explore and document the challenges and limitations to domestic solo travel as experienced by Muslim Iranian women whose family and friends are influential in actualizing their trip.

1.4 Research Question

This qualitative mini-ethnographic-case study aims to address and answer the research question: What is the role of family and friends in Iranian women's solo domestic travel actualization?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The study and its findings have broad implications for a range of groups. The academic community stands to benefit significantly, given the limited amount of research available on women's solo travel, particularly in Iran. This study has the potential to make a unique contribution to the literature on this topic by providing new insights into the experiences of Iranian women who travel alone. Furthermore, the study serves as an educative platform for participants and audiences alike, providing an opportunity to learn more about Iranian society and culture, as well as the travel aspirations and needs of Iranian women. The study also creates a space for dialogue on issues of gender segregation, allowing participants to voice their views, feelings, and perceptions without fear of judgment. This, in turn, can promote confidence-building and uninhibited self-expression.

Another significant benefit of the study is its contribution to the growth of individual independence in women by providing influential resources for safe solo travel. By sharing their experiences, participants become a reliable source of information about safe solo travel for women.

Additionally, the study can help increase the quality and variety of leisure in women's lives by suggesting positive cultural changes that accept women's rights to solo travel. Moreover, the study's findings suggest that travel for leisure can have a positive impact on women's overall well-being. By experiencing pleasure and avoiding pain, women who travel alone can create an independent character for themselves and bring peace of mind to their lives through self-realization and other aspects of self-discovery. As such, the study can also contribute to promoting self-care strategies and ultimately improving women's health and well-being, both physically and emotionally.

In addition to the academic and personal benefits of this study, there is also significant entrepreneurial potential. The tourism industry in Iran is expanding, and there is a growing demand for distinctive and genuine travel experiences (Bagheri et al., 2022). By shedding light on the experiences of Iranian women who travel alone, this study can inspire and encourage women to take solo trips, leading to a potentially profitable market for tourism entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the study's findings can assist tourism entrepreneurs develop tailored products and services that provide the needs and preferences of Iranian women who travel alone. By understanding the motivations, challenges, and benefits of solo travel for Iranian women, entrepreneurs can provide travel experiences that are safe, empowering, and enjoyable for this demographic.

1. 6 Author's Background Information

As an Iranian Muslim woman with numerous solo travel experiences, I developed an interest in this topic during one of my trips. While traveling solo, I encountered a young girl who was surprised and saddened to see me traveling alone. She believed that this was a pleasure that she would never experience. When I reassured her that she too would travel solo one day, her mother murmured, "Of course! But how will you explain it to people?!" This encounter made me

reflect on people's reactions to solo female travel, particularly for Muslim women. After conducting extensive research, I concluded that I wanted to pursue a career in tourism management. I am fascinated by the tourism industry and, as a Muslim woman, I am keen to explore the experiences of Iranian Muslim women in solo tourism, including the benefits and limitations of solo travel. I hope to dispel negative perceptions of Muslim women that stem from media bias and other sources. Through my research, I aim to showcase the progress that Iranian women have made and their role in Iranian society and the tourism industry. I also intend to provide a new perspective on the lives of modern Muslim women.

My thesis focuses on Iran as the research site, not only because of my Iranian heritage, but also because I want to highlight the experiences of Iranian women. I believe that through their stories, I can show that it is not impossible for women, particularly Iranian women, to embark on solo journeys and gain significant benefits from them. As a Muslim woman with a background in tourism, I plan to explore how religion and culture influence tourism and ultimately impact the lives of Iranian women. Furthermore, I intend to investigate the role of kin and kith in this regard. By providing insight into my perspective and motivation for choosing this research topic. My ultimate goal is to contribute to a better understanding of solo female travel, particularly for Muslim women, and to showcase the impact of tourism on Iranian women's lives.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Iran is a country with a rich history and culture, and travel within the country can be a rewarding and enriching experience for individuals. However, for Muslim Iranian women, solo travel may be perceived as unconventional or even taboo, due to societal expectations and traditional gender roles. This literature review aims to explore the challenges and limitations of solo domestic travel for Muslim Iranian women, specifically examining the role of family and friends in their travel actualization. By conducting a qualitative mini-ethnographic case study, this research seeks to understand the unique experiences and challenges faced by Iranian women as they navigate solo domestic travel within their own country. Through a review of existing literature and analysis of primary data collected through interviews, this study aims to provide insights into the complex dynamics of Iranian women pursuing solo domestic travel.

The question of Muslim women and their freedom of movement is of high interest to scholars. As such, an extensive body of literature touches on the various aspects of human rights as they relate to Muslim women. The current sections assess the literature and try to develop themes as they emerge from each research study. Many scholars now agree that it is unethical and unreasonable to limit women's rights to move around, Muslim or not. Most of the works focus on the religious, cultural, and traditional treatment of women and raise the unethical and immoral conditions associated with limiting the right of women to travel, whether as a family or in isolation. The prevailing idea from the analyzed literature is that women should be treated with the same measure as men, thus allowing them to make decisions as to where they should visit and whether they require companions or not.

The documented data demonstrates that by 2019, 18 percent of all global bookings were done by solo travelers balanced uniformly between men and women from all generations. In recent years, female solo travelers have increased tremendously and helped the industry develop even further. In fact, Javidan and Dastmalchian (2003) recognized that women are increasingly joining solo travel missions and have been recognized as a growing force in domestic and international tourism. Research has identified the socio-cultural factors governing the society that made women face travel restrictions as follows: people's lack of awareness of the importance of traveling alone and the impact of this on women's health and their quality of life, the harmfulness of the environment outside the home for women and the resulting fear in them, men's dominance over family members' free time and creating restrictions, unfair division of house chores and the inexhaustible essence of home and family affairs (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003; Pourjabali & Heibati, 2013; Riahi, 2007).

2.1 Travel, Tourism and Leisure

2.1.1 Travel as Leisure Engagement

Scholarly work attempting to understand the relationship between travel, tourism, and leisure insist that these concepts are interrelated and are often overlapped. Any form of travel, for example, has a tourism aspect to it and usually creates some leisure time for the traveler. In essence, traveling allows an individual to break the monotony of staying in the same geographic location and this break also allows the individual to create new experiences, which Chiang and Jogaratnam (2005) characterize as tourism. Tourism, as related to traveling and leisure, can be domestic or international. Domestic tourism refers to exploration within the borders of a particular country. In this form of tourism, the traveler is usually bound by the same rules but often makes new experiences and culture. On the contrary, international tourism introduces the traveler to new rules,

experiences, and cultures. The rules of the original country do not bind the traveler. Such a condition enables them to try new experiences without being judged or fear of legal or cultural repercussions.

Undeniably, leisure is highly connected with individual freedoms and liberties, which are highly restricted for women, especially in the Muslim world. Bernard et al. (2022) observe that the ability of women to undertake travel as a leisure activity is totally different from that of men, partially because of the restrictions imposed on female travel and the heavy responsibilities placed on them. According to Bianchi (2016), the limitations placed on women tend to hinder their ability to participate in the activities of their choice, including travel and opportunities to achieve high levels of satisfaction. It is also worth noting that limitations create psychological implications, such as fear for personal safety and weakness resulting from defiance. Notably, women who engage in travel as a leisure activity experience vulnerability, primarily when these activities are conducted outdoors (Tavakoli & Mura, 2021).

Even though traveling with companions is associated with many benefits, solo traveling is increasingly gaining attention as it causes flexible planning and freedom in choosing destinations (Heimtun & Abelsen, 2013). In addition, solo traveling as a form of tourism and leisure is known to improve mental health, enhance the sense of relief, and increase the sense of belonging individually and socially (Llyod & Little, 2010). Therefore, people have resorted to solo travel for various reasons. For some, solo travel enables them to experience new cultures and interact with them without the opinions of others. For others, solo traveling is a way of helping them understand new ways of thinking and interacting with the world. Generally, Heimtun and Abelsen (2013) note that solo traveling is associated with increased independence, autonomy, and forging the way for

self-development. For women, in particular, solo traveling is a way of achieving inner peace, building confidence, and escaping the hustles of everyday life.

2.2 Women and Leisure Travel

2.2.1 Women Travelers/Tourists

Perhaps, the best place to begin the analysis is to explore the views of millennial women with regard to freedom of movement. Oktadiana et al. (2019) detail the perceptions of millennial Muslim women who argue that they are similar to anyone else in the world. Essentially, they opine that they enjoy traveling, exploring, meeting new people, and making new acquaintances as much as everyone else. However, the preceding article is not categorical on women's preference when it comes to traveling. In other words, it is not clear whether the women wish to travel alone or in groups (Petty & Trussell, 2019). The essential element is that there is an underlying activism lobbying for the right of women to travel without restrictions. In Iran, however, it has become apparent from many years of research that women wish to travel alone, irrespective of the restrictions that society has placed. Razavizadeh and Kashani (2018) observe that Iranian women feel the desire to escape family responsibilities and cultural constraints for a period of time through travel and tourism. Such a condition allows them to relax and escape the difficult requirements placed on Iranian Muslim women.

Literature demonstrates that many Iranian women are generally unhappy with the roles they play in society. However, many of them fail to complain because of the religious and cultural implications that have become part of their identity. Therefore, traveling from their local society becomes the only way of achieving happiness as social and cultural constraints are not as strong abroad as they are at home. Nikjoo et al. (2021) note that women wish to travel solo in order to experience leisure alone. Being alone, away from the judging eyes of their local society and

familial responsibilities creates a sense of happiness and joy. Currently, however, many women in Muslim countries and Iran in particular do not associate travel with leisure. Nikjoo et al. (2021) observe that these women are not allowed to travel alone and therefore, are always under the same obligations binding them in their local contexts even when they travel.

It is generally agreed in scholarly circles that tourism is crucial for the improvement of physical and psychological health. Further, Yang (2020) argues that traveling as a group is even better than traveling alone as people get to interact and form new connections. However, evidence from scholars such as Yang et al. (2019) and Nikjoo et al. (2021) demonstrate that many Iranian women travelers prefer to make solo safaris. Although the cause of this preference is in dispute, some scholars agree that these women wish to escape cultural constraints that prevent them from undertaking certain preferences. For example, it is morally wrong for a Muslim woman to go outside without a hijab (hair and body cover). Tourism, however, is about going to new places and interacting with the culture of the residents. Therefore, Bianchi (2016) observes that Muslim women may prefer to make tourism arrangements alone to escape judgment and the repercussions that may follow such defiance of some cultural obligations. This is particularly true among millennials who, though not in defiance of religion, attempt to explore and experience the lifestyle of other people.

Even with the perceived benefits of women's solo travel, the restriction of traveling alone appears to be institutionalized in Iran. Cultural practices and socio-religious norms create holdbacks for female travelers (Azani, & Zal, 2019; Wantono & McKercher, 2020). For instance, hotels in Iran do not accept solo women unless they obtain the necessary documents from the authorities or book through a travel agency (Tavakoli & Mura, 2021). Additionally, married women who decide to take international trips, even for business purposes, are required to obtain

an official document in which their husband's agreement for the trip is mentioned clearly. Iranian governmental authorities have controls instituted upon every aspect of women's public and private lives. They believe women's lifestyles should be in line with Islamic principles and therefore females have to be guarded by males.

2.2.2 Solo Traveler/Tourists

Several scholars have attempted to explain the dynamic of solo traveling. Simply put, solo tourism refers to the intention of tourists to explore and visit new places in isolation or without the company of other people. However, Heimtun and Abelsen (2014) are skeptical of the idea of isolation in solo travel. They argue that solo tourism is oxymoronic in nature as these tourists must meet other people in the course of their traveling. They interact with others while seeking accommodation, transportation, entertainment, and nutriment. It is worth noting, however, that the phrase does not include the people that the tourists meet after traveling. Instead, Heimtun and Abelsen (2014) note that studies concerned with solo tourism try to explain the absence of company from family, relatives, or friends. In other words, solo tourists are travelers who arrive in destinations alone and could belong to packaged trip, group, or tour.

It is important to indicate that there exist two types of solo tourists depending on the situations causing them to travel alone. On the one hand, there are tourists who travel alone by default (Mehmetoglu et al., 2001). By-default solo travelers do not have a choice but to travel alone. In other circumstances, they would rather travel with family, friends or relatives. On the other hand, some travelers choose to travel alone even when they can be in the company of friends, partners, or relatives. The causes that motivate tourists to travel alone have not been explored widely in the scholarly fields. However, Bianchi (2016) observes that tourists who travel alone are mostly motivated by the freedom and flexibility offered by this form of tourism. Heimtun &

Abelsen (2014) also note that this form of travel is characterized by solitude. The authors define solitude as communicative separation from others. Such a condition means that some tourists prefer to travel alone to enjoy solitude.

Bianchi (2016) also explores the concept of solo traveling aiming to discover the motivators and drivers of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The author explores these values using the critical incident technique (CIT) and finds that motivators and drivers of solo holiday tourism are more connected to personal feelings. Such include the desire to have more freedom, enjoy relaxation, and experience some degree of solitude. In addition, Bianchi (2016) discovers that solo tourism is not connected much with destination factors such as safety and the quality of service. However, destination factors play a significant role in determining the satisfaction levels.

2.2.3 Women Solo Travelers

The available statistics indicate that the solo travel market accounts for more than 18 percent of the entire market and 84 percent of solo tourists are women. In the recent past, solo tourism has increased by over 45 percent, especially between 2015 and 2019 (Karagoz, et al., 2021). Data from the United States indicate that, currently, 72 percent of the women prefer to travel without companions. In Asia, millennial women (born 1990s and early 2000s) have also embraced this new phenomenon. Karagoz et al. (2021) indicate that the number of Chinese young women traveling solo has increased by 74 percent in the last five years. Globally, the available data show that one in five people now prefers to travel alone. Interestingly, the majority of the solo women travelers come from the Asian continent and Yang et al. (2019) indicate that the market has grown by 500 percent since 2009.

Women are increasingly taking interest in traveling alone owing to the freedom and flexibility that is offered by solo tourism. Mostly, solo traveling is common for women with

professional training and have active employment or business operations. As mentioned earlier, some travel alone by default. Such a condition happens in the case of work-related business trips that require the woman to travel alone (Yang & Tung, 2017). Another emerging trend for solo traveling is the preference of the millennial women to travel solo. Contrary to the earlier generations, millennial women have more freedom, autonomy, and discretion. These characteristics emerge from the fact that they are more educated and are making more money compared to the earlier generations. This gives them unparalleled independence which they use when making traveling decisions. The preference for millennial women to travel alone is witnessed across the globe.

2.2.4 Specific Concerns of Women Solo Travelers

One of the prominent concerns for women solo travelers is stigmatization based on gendered aloneness. Heteronormative conventions support gender identities in which women are supposed to be social and to perform roles such as children rearing and caring. Single or solo women, whether traveling or settled in society receive unwanted stigma labelling them as unwanted, undesirable, or social outcasts. In fact, Yang et al (2017) observe that women traveling alone receive negative labels as sexual predators who prey on other women's husbands. While traveling alone, women are prone to the usual challenges including feelings of vulnerability and continuous questions of how other people perceive their aloneness. Additionally, Karagoz et al. (2021) observe that women solo travelers face risks such as "unwanted attention, sexual harassment, and social disapproval when traveling in the gendered tourism space that privileges men's movement" (p.1595). To support their observation, Karagoz et al. (2021) note that the most crucial risk for the women is sexual involving street harassment, harmless jokes, uncomfortable gaze, getting groped in public transport, and many others.

Another specific concern for these women is the travel constraints imposed by society on solo travelers. Travel constraints are defined as factors that “inhibit people’s ability to participate in leisure activities, to spend time doing so, to take advantage of leisure services, or to achieve a desired level of satisfaction” (Jackson, 1988, p. 203). Nikjoo et al. (2021) noted, many elements of transformation in women solo travelers, such as having more self-confidence and being mentally stronger, as well as an increased ability to cope with challenges and negative events, self-awareness, relationality, and awareness of their physical abilities. In addition, some studies show that women experience a higher perception of fear and risks during their travels such as experiencing harassment, and feelings of discrimination in comparison to that of men (Tavakoli & Mura, 2021; Wantono & McKercher, 2020; Yang et al., 2019).

As discussed earlier, Crawford and Godbey (1987) identified and classified constraints and barriers into three categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. Intrapersonal barriers refer to individuals' psychological states and characteristics, including stress, attitudes, anxiety, and self-perceived skills, that may prevent an individual from engaging in leisure activities. Interpersonal barriers refer to social interactions with family and friends, and structural barriers consist of lack of access, time and money. Hung and Petrick (2010) Noted, these defined categories not only have the ability to deter the act of travel, but also the expected quality of the journey.

2.3 Ethnographic Case- Solo Women travelers of Iran

2.3.1 Existing Conditions/Considerations as Muslims

In this day and age, Iranian women have a great desire to travel alone, despite the many obstacles that exist in society. Compared to non-solo travelers in Iran, women feel happier when traveling solo because they can escape from family responsibilities and culture specific constraints imposed on women (Razavizadeh & Baradaran Kashani, 2018). Additionally, being away from

family gives them the opportunity to experience and take on challenges that create a sense of happiness and joy (Nikjoo et al., 2021). However, these crucial benefits are forfeited for many women who wish to travel alone in Iran because of socio-cultural constraints preventing women from traveling alone and can be compromised by socio-cultural obstacles, which thus become an important aspect in studying women's solo travel.

In Iran's cultural context, where being a good mother, a good wife, and a house manager are the most prominent characteristics of a woman, the normative pressure to fulfill the duties of a woman's role in the family is more important (Razavizadeh & Baradaran Kashani, 2018). In this way, single and married women invariably encounter chronic challenges to leave home for solo trips owing to domestic and socio-cultural norms. According to Azani, and Zal, (2019), when women plan to travel, they have to navigate existing restrictions expressed through family opposition and people's negative view of independent travel of women. Those women who choose to travel alone experience their role in the family and their role as a tourist at the same time, which causes challenges for women. Razavizadeh and Baradaran Kashani (2018) noted, some of the women associated this physical disconnection with relative mental-emotional disconnection and turned the trip into a complete *leisure* opportunity. On the other hand, some others continued to perform their duties through remote planning and monitoring.

In the research of Razavizadeh and Baradaran Kashani (2018), the aforementioned challenges have been conceptualized and categorized into three categories before the trip, during the trip, and after the trip. One of the important challenges for the women raised in their research was getting the consent of the family (parents, husband, and even their children) to go on a solo trip. In general, the family has reasons such as the distance, the dangerousness of the route to the destination, the senselessness of traveling alone, the lack of help from a *man* during the journey,

the belief that women are incapable of facing challenges in the journey, and reactions such as expressing concern, expressing longing, blaming, etc. in opposition to solo female travel. One of the other significant challenges faced by housewives and married women or those with children was home management.

2.3.2 Interests, Aspirations, and Prevalence of Solo Travel among Muslim Women

Throughout history, Muslim tourist movements have been limited by social, religious, and cultural factors. Today, however, female Muslim travelers are emerging as a growing sub-sector of tourism in the business and pleasure categories (Muslim women in travel, 2019). The meaning of the phrase “being alone” has changed significantly in recent times (Yang et al., 2019). For a long time in human history, solitude and aloneness has often been associated with social exclusion and pathological behavior (Lai et al., 2015). However, for some people solo travel or aloneness serves as a way to gain spiritual cultivation (Goodwin & Lockshin, 1992). With the recent changes in the social structure of modern societies, including changing family structures and individualized lifestyles, displaying solitude publicly has become more acceptable. These changes have gradually normalized solo activities in public spaces.

Travelport (2019) reports that 18% of global travel bookings is estimated to belong to solo travel and it is appealing to both men and women from every generation. The female solo travel market helped this process grow significantly in the early stages. The development of gender equality allows women who have social and financial means to travel solo (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003). This will subsequently empower women with gaining life changing experiences and broader perspectives to life (Wilson & Harris, 2006). The ability to travel alone has significant socio-cultural and symbolic meanings for women, which can lead to valuable research on female solo travel (Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Jordan & Aitchison, 2008; Yang et al.,

2019). For instance, solo women travel can provide an opportunity for personal growth and self-discovery, as individuals have the chance to step out of their comfort zones and try new things. According to Hosseini et al. (2021), for Iranian women, it would be a worthwhile experience especially in a culture that is patriarchal. In addition, studies show that solo travel has the potential to improve confidence and independence as individuals must rely on their own skills and judgment to navigate the unfamiliar environments and make sound decisions (Hosseini et al. 2021; Petty & Trussell, 2021). It also enhances great cultural understanding and thus a good way to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the different ways of life. It is important to study the impact of solo travel and the challenges women face in Iranian tourism as this will open up ways of understanding the cultural aspect of Iran and how women are perceived in the culture and find ways of addressing the concerns.

Many solo female travelers decide to travel alone regardless of having family or friends to travel with (Bianchi, 2016). A transformative experience emerges as a crucial motivator for solo travelers by choice. Transformative experience is defined as the change in self resulting from travelers' inner journey when encountering an unfamiliar environment and experience, and this transformation is enhanced in solitude (Pung et al., 2020). The change in self or transformation consists of transformative learning, existential transformation, and behavioral change (Pung et al., 2020). Previous studies have referred to the transformative results of solo travel using other terms, including self-discovery, self-improvement, liberation, empowerment, autonomy, and self-confidence, and learning new things (Bianchi, 2016; Pung et al., 2020; Wilson & Harris, 2006; Yang et al., 2019).

According to Nikjoo et al. (2021), Iranian Muslim women stated the following reasons for engaging in solo travel. Firstly, Avoiding family and its issues. Some Iranian Muslim women may

choose to travel solo as a way of escaping from the conflicts or issues within their families. Secondly, boredom within the living environment. Solo travel can be seen as a way to break up monotony for Iranian Muslim women. It adds an excitement to their lives especially if they feel stuck in a routine or unfulfilled in their current living environment that cages them. Thirdly, free time from family duties or work. Solo travel is seen as a feasible way of unwinding for Iranian Muslim women. It is seen as a way of enjoying their leisure time when away from the routine work duties. Fourthly, reducing the dependence. Solo travel among the Iranian Muslim women may be seen as a way of reducing dependence and helps them to assert their own agency, particularly if they feel dependent on others in their daily lives. Lastly, dealing with fears and lack of attractiveness in family trips. Solo travel is seen as a way of confronting and overcoming the fears harbored by Iranian Muslim women. In addition, Iranian Muslim women who feel that family vacations do not align with their interests or preferences, choose solo travel instead.

The research by Nikjoo et al. (2021), goes ahead to point out that solo travel can be a rewarding and enriching experience for women, providing the opportunity to learn new things, gain new experiences, and break free from the constraints of everyday life. These types of trips can be energizing and provide a sense of adventure, as well as a chance to experience new cultures and spaces. For some, solo travel can also be a way to connect with their spirituality or find inner peace and reflection. In addition, solo travel allows individuals to feel independent and make their own decisions, leading to a sense of autonomy and self-reliance. It can also help individuals become more adaptable and open to new experiences, leading to increased tolerance, and an understanding of others. Solo travel allows individuals to be flexible and go with the flow, rather than being tied to a strict schedule or plan. It can also provide a sense of equality and the freedom to act on one's own desires, rather than being limited by the expectations or desires of others.

In as much as women are highly interested in solo travel, there appears to exist inbuilt conditions creating mental stress and thus reducing their desire. After planning a solo trip, according to Razavizadeh and Baradaran Kashani (2018), women tend to experience intense worries associated with familial and social connections. Women who experienced intense worry could be classified into two types: the worry of some was more emotional (themselves or their family), and the worry for some others, it was more functional and caused by a temporary break from their family. The second group was concerned about home management and their duties during the women's absence. Their findings indicated that the main challenges faced by solo women travelers with their families are before and during the trip (Bernard et al., 2022; Razavizadeh & Baradaran Kashani, 2018). The most important challenge faced by women after the trip was facing the consequences of the woman's absence at home. In fact, as it was expected, most of the married women with children spoke about this point that in their absence, their duties were not fully performed by the substitute person. Unmarried girls who traveled without the consent of their families are more likely to face negative behavioral reactions from their families, especially their father, which has negative psychological effects on their daily lives for a long time.

2.3.3 Experiences of Iranian Muslim Solo Travelers

Solo travel among Muslim Iranian women is marred with lots of challenges ranging from political to socio-cultural. According to Hosseini et al. (2021), there are numerous challenges that restrict or make solo travel among Iranian Muslim women worthwhile. For instance, restrictions for women have resulted from the strict influence of Islamic rules on the culture of the country. Women are required to abide by the Shariah laws of the country such as wearing veils and having to be accompanied by a mahram whenever they are traveling or at least someone in the family who is reliable. This aspect restricts their solo travel. The restrictions also stem from the hegemonic

masculinity which weakens the position of women in the Iranian patriarchal Muslim society (Moghadam et al., 2009). Other restrictions and challenges experienced by Iranian Muslim women in their solo travel is the fact that the hegemonic masculinity has resulted in a situation where men make unchallenged decisions for themselves and the entire family. This means that the freedom of women to decide on some things such as travel rests on the position of men in the family. A woman must seek permission from the husband before making any solo travel. In Iran, the prevalence of family and friends in social policing is commonplace, as a cultural mechanism to enforce social norms and traditional values. Iranian laws, such as mandatory hijab laws, exacerbate the difficulties faced by women who choose to travel alone, as they may face scrutiny and even legal repercussions for not conforming to gendered expectations in public spaces (Golkaramnay & Welchman, 2019).

Additionally, religious beliefs place a negative perception on the travel experiences of Iranian Muslim women. This stems from the fact that religion is interwoven into different aspects of Iranian life, particularly women's leisure time. As a result, women are traditionally prohibited from traveling alone and those who do face lots of hurdles including religious and family opposition as well as the negative perceptions from the locals (Nikjoo et al., 2021). While this may have been the case for many years, the tourism industry is currently undergoing a transformation due to the increasing diversity of cultures, resulting in a shift in the travel experience. The traditional society is keeping up pace with modernity and this has an impact on tourism as well as the case of solo travel for Iranian women. The internet and the emergence of a new middle class of educated young women has led to a situation where women are increasingly seeking newer lifestyles and leisure activities (Hosseini et al., 2021). Solo travel is one of them and this has led to a demand for female-led travel and empowerment. There are few studies that have investigated

the experiences of solo travel among Iranian Muslim women, and bridging this gap is what this study aims to accomplish.

2.3.4 The Problem Encountered by Muslim Solo Women Travelers of Iran

2.3.4.1 Religion-Cultural Perspectives

In Iranian society and most families, patriarchal ideologies prevail. It means that men hold the power in the all-important institutions of society while women are denied access to such powers but are expected to follow them without challenge. However, this does not imply that women are completely powerless or completely deprived of their rights, influence, or resources (Simonetti, 2011). In general, patriarchy refers to all types of male superiority that is witnessed around women. In this ideology, men are superior to women, and this has created lots of challenges for Iranian Muslim women who wish to travel solo (Riahi, 2007). A large part of this is encouraged by the prevalent religion in the country. As a predominantly Muslim country, the role of Islam and traditional religious values may influence societal expectations around women's behavior, including their participation in solo travel. Some women may face barriers or challenges due to religious or cultural expectations around appropriate behavior for women, such as dress codes or limitations on interactions with men (Javidan, & Dastmalchian, 2003). These expectations can impact women's ability to fully engage in solo travel, as they may feel restricted or self-conscious about adhering to these norms. Additionally, religion may also play a role in the support or opposition that women receive from their families and communities when it comes to solo travel. According to Hosseini et al. (2021), some families or communities may view solo travel as incompatible with traditional religious values or as a threat to a woman's reputation, leading to resistance or disapproval.

The Quran, which is the holy book of Islam, has always encouraged people to travel around, whether domestically or internationally. It is clearly mentioned in the Quran that traveling can make people think, and with the attitude and vision it gives to individuals, it makes them to explore the world of creation (Surah Baqarah). In this religious book, not only tourism is not forbidden, but people are strongly invited and encouraged to travel. This is true for all human beings, both male and female. Of course, all these insinuations are mentioned in the Quran along with the observance of Islamic laws (Hadiths and other books associated with Islam). Women can travel if they observe religious laws and do not commit sins. Shafaghi et al. (2012) noted, from the point of view of Islam, sin for a woman can be the following: not having hijab and chastity, particularly by way of not having sobriety in speech and behavior and traveling without the permission of father or husband. In Islam and the Islamic perspective, that which harms the moral health of society must be fought against while all that which guarantees moral conduct must be pursued and strengthened.

Research on women's leisure has shown that women are more restricted than men in fun and recreational activities. In other words, despite the opportunities and choices that women have today, their freedom to engage and enjoy their leisure travel experiences has been limited by societal norms (Riahi, 2007; Stodolska & Livengood, 2006). Religious beliefs are responsible for this as it places a cap on some aspects of women solo travel. For instance, the Shariah laws, which is a significant component of Islamic religion in Iran recommend that for a woman to travel, they must travel with a male relative who is considered a “mahram”; an unmarriageable kin (Jafari & Scott, 2014). This may include a father, brother, son, or another close male relative. This requirement is based on the belief that a woman's modesty and honor should be protected while traveling, and that a mahram can provide support and protection in case of any difficulties. Some

Iranian Muslim women may feel that solo travel goes against this principle and may prefer to travel with a mahram for safety and religious reasons. In addition, Islamic teachings place a strong emphasis on modesty, and many Iranian Muslim women may feel that solo travel could compromise their modesty or cause them to be seen as immodest (Shafaghi et al., 2012). For example, some women may be hesitant to travel alone to destinations where they may be expected to dress differently or remove their hijab.

In some Muslim societies, there may be cultural or societal expectations around women's relationships and marriage, and solo travel may be seen as going against these expectations. For example, a woman who travels alone may be seen as rejecting traditional gender roles or as being too independent or self-sufficient. Additionally, there are some Islamic teachings that prohibit certain types of travel, such as travel to countries or regions that are seen as hostile to Islam or to places where one may be exposed to immoral behavior or sinful activities (Poopale Ratthinan & Selamat, 2018). Some Iranian Muslim women may feel that solo travel to these types of destinations goes against their religious beliefs.

In Iran, the society is regulated by observing Shariah standards, which directly and indirectly impact women's leisure and travel (Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010). Therefore, religion affects people's decisions, their experiences, and the realization of their journey. Jafari & Scott (2014), argue that Islam is positive toward travel and tourism, but in practice, the Iranian Islamic government is inconsistent in following these tendencies. Moreover, the influence of culture can also be felt in the way leisure is planned and implemented for women in Iran. On the one hand, the culture that dominates Iranian society limits the mobility and activity of women, and on the other hand, families contribute to the restriction of women's free time (Riahi, 2007). Religious and doctrinal barriers in societies like Iran deserve more comprehensive studies.

2.3.4.2 Societal Perspectives

In Iran, one of the most important social and cultural criteria for classifying people in society is gender. According to many sociologists, gender is perhaps the only important characteristic that fundamentally determines people's perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and dignity in society, and it is strongly influenced by social and cultural learning (Pourjabali & Heibati, 2013; Riahi, 2007). In the Iranian society, women are highly encouraged to stay indoors with their families at the expense of traveling. Even when they travel, society discourages women from traveling alone (Hendelman-Baavur, 2019). Perspectives of Iranian culture can affect various dimensions of women's safety. Notably, women who are seen in public places alone invite a wide range of risks, such as street harassment, sexist jokes, uncomfortable gaze, getting groped in public transportation, and intimidating experiences with accommodation (Karagöz et al., 2021; Seow & Brown, 2018). Despite aspiring to travel alone for leisure, many women in the Islamic world are afraid to do so (Oktadiana et al., 2020), mostly because young Muslim women are usually dissuaded from traveling alone in the Iranian society (Hendelman-Baavur, 2019; Jamal & El-Bassiouny, 2018; Karagöz et al., 2021). Due to socio-cultural prejudices, Muslim families are reluctant to allow women to travel alone for leisure (Jamal & El-Bassiouny, 2018).

It seems that women's restrictions in Iran become more severe when they participate in activities outside their home due to the fear of their personal safety. Despite a heightened perception of risk, young women have continued their solo journeys and, in doing so, have overcome their fears to achieve a stronger sense of agency, liberation, independence, and authority (Tavakoli & Mura, 2021; Yang et al., 2019). Also, the position of women in society, their limitations in accessing recreational resources, society's expectations from women's lives, roles,

and responsibilities that they bear, cause women's freedom to decrease and their choices to be limited or encounter obstacles (Riahi, 2007; Stodolska & Livengood, 2006).

2.3.4.3 Familial Networks

Family is the foundational structure of the Iranian society, and these families are purely patriarchal. Such a condition means for a woman to make travel arrangements, she must seek guidance and approval from the patriarch of the family. The patriarch is usually the father or the husband. The ability of Iranian women to engage in solo travel depends, majorly, on the attitudes of the patriarch. If the patriarch has negative views about this form of travel, the woman in question is most likely going to be disallowed. Gitelson and Kerstetter (1995) observe that the transferring experience of family members has had an insurmountable impact on the rising cases of women solo travelers in the Iranian experience. Given that some women have already engaged in this form of travel, their experience may encourage others in the family to do the same. It may also help the patriarch to lessen his rigidity towards solo travel. The opposite is also true. In case when women have traveled alone and suffered bad experiences, they transfer this experience to their family members. The transference encourages members of the family to discourage solo travels among women (Gitelson & Kerstetter 1995). In fact, Nikjoo et al. (2021) observe that a significant percent of the disallowed solo domestic tours among women may have originated from fellow women.

According to Yeganeh (2015), “Iran is categorized as a traditional culture emphasizing values and ideals such as the importance of parent–child ties, deference to authority, seniority, and absolute moral standards” (p.183). Evidently, the most obvious characteristic of the Iranian culture is family and to a large extent, in-group orientations. One of the identifying characteristics of this society is the collectivist culture which is majorly founded on social interactions (Yeganeh, 2015). The collectivist culture is characterized by a cultivated sense of inter-personal affinity to family,

friends, and society. Depending on a person's social commitments at home, family members have the right to influence a person's decision to travel solo (Nyaupane & Andereck, 2007). Igarashi et al. (2008) suggested that cultivating trust and confidence among family and social networks is a suitable alternative for individuals of collectivist culture(s). Thus, it is important to develop an understanding of the enduring cultural values that affect gender equity in order to gain a clear perspective on how these values influence female solo traveling (Delhey & Newton, 2003; Igarashi et al., 2008).

2.3.4.4 Outcomes to Potential Iranian Women Solo Travelers

Generally, the overall ethnographic makeup of the Iranian society seems to discourage domestic solo travel of women in the Iranian society. Ethnographic challenges such as religion, culture, societal beliefs, and family seem to dissuade women from traveling alone. However, as Papoli Yazdi and Dezharkhooy (2014) observe, it is clear that some of these restrictions emerge from cultural beliefs that have developed over time, thus influencing how society views the interaction between women and the external world. Islam does not prohibit travel for any gender. From a religious perspective, Islam seems to promote solo travel of women. However, the society has created rigid laws prohibiting women from moving around without the company of family, relatives, or partners. According to Zamani-Farahani and Henderson (2010), most of the restrictions placed on women travelers emerge from the opinionated views of the society and the intention of the patriarchal society to control the activities of women. Concurring with Zamani-Farahani & Henderson (2010), if these opinions and beliefs continue prevailing in Iran more and more women will be prevented from undertaking solo tourism.

The rigid nature of the Iranian patriarchal society and the negative views associated with solo travel of women perpetuate even to the destinations. As mentioned earlier, the society does

not yet believe that women should be allowed to travel alone. It follows that women traveling alone in Iran facing varying degrees of stigma and to some extent, disassociation. These women experience various challenges ranging from physical to psychological harassment. Moghadam (2007) confirms that there have been numerous cases of physical assault to women traveling alone. These can occur in the form of sexual harassment, physical assault, and jeering. Psychological torments include unwanted attention, uncomfortable gazes, denial of accommodation and many more. If allowed to continue, these stigmas are likely to reduce solo women travel by discouraging women from traveling alone. According to Nikjoo et al. (2021), seeking guidance from individuals with prior travel experience and receiving positive feedback can be helpful in building the necessary confidence and motivation for women to embark on solo travels. This guidance can come in the form of consultations with friends or trusted family members to create a positive environment for decision-making and implementation. Because the family culture among Iranians has a network connection between relatives and family members, the reflection of the successful or unsuccessful experiences of each person is considered as an experimental test for other family members (Nikjoo et al., 2021; Yeganeh, 2015). Based on this, the results obtained from the observation and believable definitions of people will make people and families check their decisions based on them. For example, if one of the family members experienced insurmountable social barriers during a solo trip, there is no doubt that the power of risk in women to create independence in a solo trip will be reduced.

Of particular importance is the outcome that women in families can have to solo traveling of women in the same household. Nyaupane and Andereck (2007) note that in a family-oriented society, women's decision-making and independence are more fulfilling and successful when all elements related to female members are satisfied. In fact, the influence of relatives on parents can

be equally beneficial or detrimental to establishing a step-by-step approach to travel planning (Yang & Tung, 2017). Thus, the considerable impact of Iranian families, which includes viewpoints and guidance, forms a fundamental aspect of communication in traditional societies, and constructive changes can be implemented to reform such societies. By redefining them, it is possible to connect the traditional society with useful and sublime reforms to global and modern issues, and along with preserving local and national beliefs and culture in society, from the heart of the same culture, present a new recommendation to remove the obstacles towards globalization (Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010).

Conclusion

Solo traveling is slowly taking over the domestic and international tourism markets. In the past, people were obsessed with taking family, packaged, or group tours and this was associated with the companionship that group traveling provided. In the recent past, however, solo travelers have taken over the market with many people perceiving it as a leisure engagement which enables people to enjoy autonomy, flexibility, and freedom. Women have also penetrated this space all over the world. This review of the literature has concentrated on solo women travelers from the Muslim world, and specifically in Iran. It has assessed why Iranian women are increasingly opting to travel alone despite the restrictions that have been limiting them, in particular, relatives and friends. Overall, there are many factors that have motivated women to travel solo both to domestic and international destinations. Many of these factors touch on the need to escape the rigidity provided by religion, culture, society, and family. Revolutions caused by generational changes have also provided Iranian women with a chance to explore the world alone.

It is clear from the literature explored that solo travel among Iranian women is a complex issue that needs further investigation. However, it appears that there are specific concerns that are

limiting more women from engaging in this form of tourism. For example, women are still afraid of the stigma that emerges from their solitude in public. Other issues include domestic restrictions, sexual harassment, psychological tormenting by the public, and reluctance by institutions to promote solo travel for women. In the future, research should focus on developing mechanisms which can boost Iranian society to accept solo women travelers owing to the many psychological and health benefits that this form of tourism offers to women.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The following chapter presents the rationale for using a qualitative mini-ethnographic case study methodology, the process of data collection, the recruitment of research participants, and the analysis of data, limitations and as well as guidelines for the ethical aspects of the research.

3.1 Study Design

3.1.1 Qualitative Research

The philosophical background of this qualitative study is a constructive paradigm based on the claim that reality is socially constructed and is best understood by exploring tacit knowledge, that is, knowledge based on the experience of individuals (Lincoln & Guba, 2016). In the present study, as a researcher, I sought to construct the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspective of the participants to identify shared culture and behavior. Qualitative research has a potential to explore the increasing complexities of the phenomenon and such research is considered valuable for tourism researchers because it can provide a new level of understanding for the study (Jennings, 2018). In other words, qualitative research is any type of research that provides findings obtained by methods other than statistical or other quantification methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In qualitative research, while paying attention to the viewpoints of the researched people, the researcher tries to be aware of their viewpoints. In this method, the researcher and the people being researched establish a mutual relationship, and finally, they rely on the statements and observable behaviors of people to collect the main data. In quantitative research, however, mental processes usually remain hidden and undiscovered, and this is what qualitative research aims to reveal, that is, it uncovers the unsaid points of people's minds, which are usually not accessible in the form of structured questionnaires, with closed answers (Patton, 2015).

The data of this qualitative research study is collected through informal observation and interviews or oral interactions and is focused on the meanings and interpretations of the participants. According to Jennings (2018), this type of research obtains its information by referring to opinions, values, and behaviors in an intact social context. The path of qualitative research is more determined during the research than it is predetermined. Therefore, qualitative research has a cyclical, recursive, reflexive, and spiral nature, not a predetermined line. Of course, this does not mean that the process of this research is irregular, rather it means there is the presence of creativity and innovation of the researcher in the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Qualitative studies generally last for months, and years and its report have a narrative form and style resembling a story with different episodes. There are many valid and strong reasons for conducting qualitative methods for the present research. One of these reasons is related to nature of the research question. Some fields such as tourism and travel are naturally more related to qualitative research. A qualitative method was selected for this study to uncover little-known phenomena and see what lies behind them. In addition, it was also used to gain a new perspective on those things about which there is only some awareness. Also, qualitative method can provide fine details of phenomena that are difficult to present in quantitative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Considering that the purpose of the research here is to explore and document the challenges and limitations to domestic solo travel as experienced by Muslim Iranian women whose family and friends are influential in actualizing their trip, a qualitative method has reasonable potential to discover the increasing complexities of leisure time and travel behavior (Jennings, 2018), especially when it deals with the lives and limitations of women (Wilson & Little, 2005). Therefore, it is appropriate to use a qualitative method for the purpose of this study, as I sought to understand people's perceptions and experiences about the role of friends and family in

encouraging/discouraging Iranian Muslim women to travel solo for leisure; identifying the barriers that the studied women faced and then, their outcomes were possible through the qualitative research.

3.1.2 Mini-Ethnographic Case Study Tradition

3.1.2.1 The Ethnographic Tradition

The design of the study is a mini-ethnographic case study. In essence, ethnographic case studies employ ethno-specific methods that enable researchers to focus on building arguments about cultural, group, or community formation or examining other sociocultural phenomena (Gates & Schwandt, 2018). An ethnographic research method necessitates the researcher's direct access to culture and people belonging to society. The time-consuming nature of the ethnographic tradition is probably the reason for the emergence of mini-ethnography. This type of ethnography was applied in my study since a cultural context was being investigated which focused on a specific or limited area of research. Mini-ethnographies can be conducted within a week to a year. Thus, the other reason why I selected mini-ethnography was my timeline and study deadlines. Such a design in this study sought to contribute to an understanding of experiences and the approaches to a collective or community's solidarity alongside individual experiences. The methodology was relevant to study participants because I as ethnographer aimed to explore patterns of behavior such as rituals or social behaviors as well as how to express their ideas and beliefs through language, material activities, and practices (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In the current research, ethnography was aimed at exploring the cultural interactions and meanings in the lives of a group of people. Here, the intent of mini ethnography was for me as a researcher to understand the cultural customs, values and roles related to what the participants remember. Moreover, I identified the reflection of

gender beliefs that are enacted in social relations in a collectivist culture with an ethnographic approach.

3.1.2.2 The Case of Women Solo travelers of Iran

The purpose of a case study is to answer the "how" and "why" questions about a phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This method is used in situations where the researcher's goal is to explore the contextual conditions that may be related to the phenomenon under study, as well as when "the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not evident" (Yin, 2009, p. 46). In addition, the purpose of case studies is to accurately describe case reconstructions (Flick, 2015). Thus, the case study has been chosen for this research method because I examined an in-depth analysis of challenges and limitations to domestic solo travel as experienced by Muslim Iranian women whose family and friends are influential in actualizing their trip. Hence, this case study was focused on empirical knowledge of the cases. To this end, the case of Iranian women who express and exercise autonomy through solo leisure travels was in focus. According to the socio-religious perspectives of Iranians, women are more limited than men in achieving recreational activities, especially solo travel. In other words, despite the opportunities and choices that women have today, their freedom to use them and enjoy their leisure and travel experiences are limited by family and society due to their gender status as women. Exploring the Iranian collectivist culture was possible through the narratives of the solo female travelers and their close associates, both of whom enact a 'gender system' that reproduces as well as challenges cultural norms within its society.

In addition, an instrumental case study has been selected for the research method in which the case itself was secondary to understanding a gender(ed) system that constrains and segregates women despite its claim to collectivism. According to Stake (2008), an instrumental case study

allows researchers to gain an insider's perspective on an issue or concern. Hence, this mini-ethnographic study was considered as an instrumental case study that sheds light on the Iranian collectivist culture. Since I conducted an in-depth analysis of women's solo domestic travels, an instrumental case study used primary cases to gain insights into the (a) the personal, interpersonal, and systemic challenges to solo travels of Muslim women (b) specific problems of the collectivist culture of Muslim and Iranian ethnic societies (c) possible directions for facilitating gendered travel.

3.2 Sampling and Demographic Criteria

3.2.1 Sample Size

Qualitative research is suitable for in-depth and comprehensive study of a limited number of cases or phenomena (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative inquiry usually focuses on relatively small samples, even purposively selected single cases (Patton, 2002). This study developed purposive sampling since the rationale and power of purposive sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study. Studying information-rich cases provides insight and deep understanding rather than empirical generalizations. Patton (2002) noted that the number of participants selected in a purposive sample is determined by the purpose of the study, the research question, available resources, and limitations. It involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of people who are particularly experienced in or knowledgeable about a phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In addition to experience and knowledge, Bernard (2002) noted the significance of willingness and availability to participate and the capability to convey experiences and viewpoints in an expressive and reflective manner. Accordingly, this mini-ethnographic case study focused on three women who have traveled independently at least 3 or 4 times in Iran. Participants were grouped into three categories. One

participant traveled only with family consent and without their support. This means that the family was satisfied with the woman's solo trip, but they did not help or support her to actualize the trip. For example, financial assistance or taking responsibility in the absence of the woman. The other participant traveled with family consent and their support so that the woman was able to travel conveniently with the financial and/or emotional support of her family. The last participant traveled without family consent and support. In this situation, in the stages of preparing for a solo trip and actualizing it, and even after returning from the trip, the woman faced many different challenges. The study aimed to interview three participants, all of whom are Iranian citizens to gather rich in-depth data as evidence.

3.2.2 Demographic Criteria

This study sought to involve three female participants. The participants in the research were subject to the following criteria: 1) All participants had to be resident Iranian citizens who have lived their entire life in Iran along with their family structure. It was crucial for the participants to be raised in their society so that they were well-versed and by and large compliant with its norms and customs, 2) They had to be Muslim since the religion of Iranian people is Islam and 98% of Iranians are Muslims, 3) They ought to be from the middle class of the society whereby their income is salary-based and don't travel so much by air, 4) All participants were 30 years or above of age since they have more adult life experiences and are able to narrate them practically (Shahvali & Safiri, 2023). In addition, in Iranian culture, women after 30 years of age are more reliable in their decision makings, 5) The women travelers should have had the experience of traveling alone (solo) at least 3 or 4 times in Iran in the past five years approximately so that they could compare their experiences and the outcomes of their trips. It is understood that these travels should have begun solo and remained so until they return to their place of residence. In other words, they were

not joining or being escorted by people for company or to go elsewhere together. All decisions about and during their solo travels had to be theirs to make and execute, 6) The solo travels of the participants had to involve at least two overnight stays in places other than their place of residence. Since trips were not undertaken by plane, a long time was spent on the road and required staying at least two nights. Short-distance trips that are around the place of residence can usually result in a one-night stay, 7) They were highly educated (master's degree). According to Afshar (2009), today in Iran, in the middle class the majority of women are highly educated for many reasons. For instance, they can have well-paid job positions. Another reason is that they think in the future they may be educated mothers without jobs, but they will be effective in society in raising their children as educated and informed parents. In addition, women have the opportunity to meet men in an environment that is approved by parents and society since they are not allowed to communicate with men elsewhere.

3.3 Data Collection and Recruitment

Classifications of the interview method have been presented in research method texts, as belonging to one of three categories: unstructured, structured, and semi-structured interviews (Jennings, 2005). In the first type of interview, the interview questions are not designed in advance, but they are related to the goal or the general question of the research. Also, there is no predetermined category to classify the answers. The interviewee is free to talk about whatever they consider important, and usually, a little interference and influence from the researcher are applied during the interview. The second type of interview is very similar to a questionnaire. The questions are planned in advance and the researcher uses a formal questionnaire. Structured interviews are used in quantitative research with a large number of interviews. In a structured interview, flexibility and variability are minimized.

The present study design was used semi-structured and in-depth interviews as these are the two methods recommended for mini-ethnography case studies (Rubin, 2012). I sought in-depth information by asking exploratory and follow-up questions (Appendix A) to gain a better understanding in a conversational manner. Fusch et al. (2017) assert that semi-structured interviews are a common method of data collection in both mini-ethnography and case studies. Based on the aforementioned demographic criteria, I determined who to interview and what questions needed to be answered or clarified. Flick (2015) noted, in a semi-structured interview, the researcher prepares a list of questions or simply the main topics of the desired research, which is called the interview guide. The interview guide used in this study only specified the topics that I had wanted to cover, and I as the interviewer was not required to follow the order in asking the questions according to the interview guide. In this case, the interviewees had enough freedom and discretion in answering the questions openly (Flick, 2015). This type of interview, while focusing on the research subject, with the necessary flexibility, allowed them to share personal theories and address aspects of the subject that were important from their point of view (Flick, 2015).

In fact, the interviewees had a complex reservoir of knowledge about the subject under study. This knowledge had explicit and direct assumptions, and the interviewees could react spontaneously in response to an open question. A semi-structured interview was appropriate since I as the researcher already identified the sample in relation to the research topic. Encouraging respondents to express their core attitudes, beliefs, and values is very important with this type of interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In-depth interviews, on the other hand, aim to gain a more accurate and richer understanding of a topic that is well-known to the study participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In the present study, the questions (Appendix A) were semi-structured so that respondents could elaborate on the topic, rather than simply answering "yes" or "no". Additionally,

in-depth interviews used open-ended questions to give respondents the freedom to answer the questions using their own words.

Approval for conducting the study from the Brock University Ethics Board was received in November 2022. The participants were in the privacy and comfort of their own home or in their preferred location. I explored the extended social networks of friends and acquaintances for potential participants to ensure that no participants would be selected from within my immediate social circle. While the interviews were conducted telephonically, the research site is Iran, because it is the country where the participants live and grew up. The participant's locations were in different places in Iran. By choosing participants from other Iranian cities, an opportunity was provided to explore and get acquainted with the cultures, thoughts, and challenges of women in other cities. Interviews were conducted telephonically and asked on my social media account on Instagram as well. After identifying a few prospective participants and exchanging messages in which their consent to participate was given, I contacted them with a verbal script explaining the study intent and the critical values of the study via telephone. After agreeing on the date and time of the interview, each participant was provided with the consent form by email and asked to sign and return it.

Apart from the written consent, at the beginning of each interview, verbal permission was requested for the audio recording of the interviews. Every interview took 2-2.5 hours in length. As the researcher, I also needed to do member checks so that participants could have the opportunity to confirm what they said in their interviews. One of the participants in this study asked for additional time to clarify and add more about some questions which was practical for the analysis. Member check lasted 30-45 minutes for each interview. An interview guide was used in the data collection process (Appendix B). The interview guide gave me the confidence to do the interviews

independently and assisted me in maintaining a conversational flow. The questions used in the interview guide were general, comprehensive, and open-ended to allow all pertaining topics to unfold during the interview. Primary information about the women, such as age, marital status, educational background, and work experience was collected at the beginning of the interview to provide a general picture of each participant's life. It also made the participants feel more comfortable to start the interview process in this way. In the continuation of this preliminary part of the interview, certain issues and topics were raised for discussion. These included questions related to the personal need and necessity for women to travel alone, the role of family and friends in women's decision-making and their solo travel actualization, and existing social and individual restrictions on women's solo travel and the ways to deal with them. Some question examples are as follows: 1) Can you describe what compels/makes you to undertake these journeys by yourself? When you went on each journey, what made you decide to go alone? 2) Can you please describe for me any personal and/or social concerns that you had to deal with in planning your independent/singular travels? Why do you think that these concerns exist? 3) Could you describe the events and reactions of others when you announced your interest in traveling alone around Iran? Additionally, handwritten notes were documented during the interviews to focus on the interview and provide context for subsequent analysis along with the interview transcript.

Since the interviews were conducted with Iranians residing in Iran, I translated the questions into Persian, and their accuracy was verified by an Iranian-Canadian teacher in a Canadian school. The interviews were all audio-recorded with two recording devices for assurance in case one of them stopped working. The interviews were transcribed verbatim without a computer software. As Silverman (1993) said, “transcripts of audio-recording provide superior accounts of the natural interaction within an interview” (as cited in Jennings, 2005 p.111). The

interview process and transcribing lasted for about a month (November-December 2022) because it coincided with the Woman, Life, Freedom protests, which disrupted all communications inside Iran. After transcribing each interview, thematic data analysis was done in Persian rather than English. The results of the analysis, including the pertinent sections of the interviews, should have been mentioned in the analysis chapter of this research study. This process was supervised by the same person who verified the accuracy of the translated interview questions.

3.4 Data Analysis

According to Patton (2015), qualitative analysis transforms data into findings. No formula exists for that transformation. Analysis can be described as the process of ordering data, organizing opinions and undifferentiated observations into patterns, categories, and descriptive units, and looking for relationships between them (Brewer, 2000). A general approach to analysis is known as thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, Ryan and Bernard (2003) identify thematic coding as a prerequisite to the main and common forms of qualitative data analysis, rather than a unique and special method. However, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis should be considered a special method because of its valuable advantage, that being flexibility. The search and investigation of patterning in language does not need to adhere to a specific theory of language or explanatory semantic framework for humans, practices, or experiments. Therefore, I used thematic analysis as a method to recognize, analyze, and report patterns in the qualitative data produced by the interviews. This method entailed a process of analyzing and transforming scattered, diverse textual information into rich and detailed data that could be used to investigate the role of friends and relatives in women's solo domestic travel actualization. Thematic analysis in this research study included four stages: data

management, data transcription, familiarization, data reduction and conceptualization by coding and obtaining the main categories.

Initially, I outlined the stages of analysis, followed by a detailed explanation of each stage. An inductive analysis of the interviews was carried out to provide a more precise study of the participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). The analysis process began with identifying the smallest meaningful units of data. The second step consisted of clustering similar semantic units in sub-themes. The third and final step involves comparing and clustering all subthemes to create broad themes. After coding all the data, the process of sorting the linked codes started. Similar codes were grouped together, and a category appeared. A cluster of equivalent codes is called a category – a conceptual label for a group of related codes (Jones et al., 2013). The final themes, including their sub-themes, provided insight into the perspective of the participants and the meaning they and the researcher gave to the findings.

The first stage of the analysis is data management. In order not to get lost in the pile of data, I accomplished a careful management system from the beginning. In addition, files and folders were given a distinct label so that they could be easily navigated. A backup system was created and updated regularly. The second stage in data analysis is data transcription. Verbatim transcription of each individual interview was done without computer software and only by listening to the audio recording. Transcription works best if researchers do it themselves because they get a chance to approach the data and familiarize themselves with them (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2015). In addition, I added memos and notes to the transcription. Notes and memos describe what researchers think during the analysis process, and why and how their thinking is important to the study (Jones et al., 2013).

The third stage is familiarization. It is important to become very familiar with data and immerse yourself in them. The process of familiarization took place when I listened to audio recordings and read through the transcripts and memos many times. It was at this stage that I got to know the depth of the data. The last step is data reduction and conceptualization. As stated earlier, it is necessary that the researcher listens closely to the data, reads the transcripts several times, and get a general picture of what the participants meant by what they said. When doing this, the researcher often feels overwhelmed by the data. Obviously, the data must be reduced or aggregated because it is not possible to use everything from the transcript. As Jones et al. (2013) noted, researchers examine, segment, and reduce data; they need to look for patterns, themes, and units of meaning that emerge directly from the data. Coding and categorization - data indexing - are significant strategies in qualitative data analysis as the researcher looks for meaning in the data. Coding begins after the familiarization process. Creating analytical codes is required because it prevents the researcher from drowning in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mason, 2002). A code is an identifying name or label given to a data unit or a piece of data. It is a word that is used to demonstrate the phenomenon that the researcher reveals from the text.

Finally, the data reduction and conceptualization stage commenced with the development of primary codes; codes introduce data features that are of relevance to the research question guiding the analysis. Coding can be done manually or through software. In the present research, coding was done manually. For this purpose, I started reading the sentences from the beginning of each transcript and highlighted them with different colors so that I could identify different points of view. This type of coding is called open coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which means that there were no predetermined codes, but as I worked through the coding process, I developed and modified the codes. 76 primary codes were counted from transcriptions. Any part of the text

that seemed to be relevant to the research topic or specifically support the research question was reviewed; after finishing this procedure, the codes were collated, compared and finally reduced in a process that resulted in 23 final codes. After coding revisions, I wrote descriptions of the main ideas identified in front of the codes and then classified them into meaningful categories. Afterward, the search for themes began, which is similar to creating codes to identify similarities in the data. I completed this step by collecting all the coded data related to each subject or participant. During the theme review, sub-themes were formed. This stage included two additional stages of review and refinement/formation of sub-themes. The first step consisted of checking the codes at the clustering level. In the second step, the validity of sub-themes in relation to the data set was considered and 8 sub-themes were obtained. Thereafter, the main themes presented for analysis were defined and re-examined, and then the data within them were analyzed. Then, I conducted and wrote a detailed analysis of each main theme. As a researcher, I asked myself, "what story is this theme telling?" and "how does this topic fit into the overall story about the data?". At this stage, main themes were obtained from the sub-themes including socio-cultural aspects, travel decision-making process, and empowering aspects. In the last step, a report was prepared and is presented in the next chapter. The final step begins when the researcher has a set of main themes that are completely conceptual and in accordance with the underlying structures of the research.

3.5 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is considered an important element in qualitative research and leads to an increase in the quality of qualitative research. Reflexivity in the research process is an attempt to understand how one's values, beliefs, and perspectives may permeate the findings (Hill & Dao, 2020). As the researcher, I was aware of my ideas formed from my personal experiences might

influence my interpretation of the findings, so I was careful to control the data collection process during the interviews and at the analysis stage. A rigorous and coherent process was used to interview, transcribe, and analyze the opinions and experiences of each participant, which was explored with open awareness of my preconceived biases and assumptions. The purpose of reflexivity is to limit subjectivity and gain a deeper understanding of the experiences, process, or culture under study from the perspective of the participants (Probst & Berenson, 2014). According to Hill and Dao (2020), in order to be able to apply reflexivity in qualitative research, the researcher must have critical awareness and know how to understand social problems. As a researcher with the first-hand experiences, I was aware of my own personal experiences, knowledge, and mentalities and the challenges of society and women as well.

Reflexivity in ethnographic research is a challenge between being a researcher and being a member of society. According to Probst and Berenson (2014), this contradiction and challenge provide opportunities to expand the insights derived from data sources; it means that I was not just an observer, but I played an active role with the participant in back-and-forth interactions. Thus, reflexivity leads to a broader understanding of the dynamics of specific phenomena and their connections with culture. The question that may be raised is how to include reflexivity in the research process and maintain it.

One of the ways to apply reflexivity in this research was to write reflective notes that recorded my experiences. According to Lambert et al. (2010), keeping records of individuals' thoughts, feelings, and activities related to the research process helps to increase self-awareness. Another method applied to strengthen reflexivity was being aware of the interactions between myself as the researcher and the participants. The researcher must have a high level of knowledge and awareness of the real relationship with the participants and the direct effects this person may

have on shaping of the direction of research process (Lambert et al., 2010). Also, notes and memos were used as another efficient way to review and think about the interviews. Memos are brief descriptive records of observations about events or an interview (Patton, 2002).

3.6 Trustworthiness

The proposal for this study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University; File number 21-281 - SINGH. Following the completion of interviews and data gathering, some additional prerequisites had to be taken into account, including trustworthiness, authenticity, confidentiality, and anonymity. Several factors ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

Credibility can be maintained using data triangulation (Denzin, 1978). I used academic and non-academic texts related to the subject under study for credibility. Also, doing member checks is another strategy that has been considered to ensure credibility. This is the most important way to rule out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants are saying and doing and their views on what is happening, and it is also an important way to identify any biases and misunderstandings (Wolcott, 2008). Another strategy for reflexivity was to ensure confirmability, which allowed me as the researcher to better explore assumptions that were relevant to my mindset. I explained my biases, inclinations, and assumptions about the research to be undertaken. My experience in solo travel is an example of such a bias. While reflexivity has long been established as a key component in qualitative research, the validity of the overall study can be strengthened by thoughtful and insightful expression of the ways in which researchers' subjective positions affect all aspects of the research process (Probst & Berenson, 2014). Trustworthiness requires us to question the compatibility of the methodological process (Patton, 2015). Providing justification

for the methods used as well as clarity in the analytical methods increased the sense of the trustworthiness of the study.

Important factors must be considered when evaluating the authenticity of this study. First, fairness is ensured by strict management of the data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This means that all interviews follow research protocols, and the interview guide was used in the interview process. Second, ontological authenticity was established through the theoretical practice of putting me in the place of the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I took the time to consider and understand the participants' life realities and how they might have affected the study. These facts and the different structures of reality that participants have were of particular importance in the mini-ethnographic case study research design.

Regarding confidentiality, all data collected during the interview between the participants and the researcher have remained confidential (Patton, 2015). Any data collected was stored in a password-protected spreadsheet and I was the only one with access to this spreadsheet. Along with the general information about the study that I provided to potential participants, I also explained to the participants that the information exchanged for and during the interview would be anonymized for reporting, presentation, and dissemination. Any information connecting the participant with the data was withheld by me as the researcher and has not been revealed to anyone. All participants' names, emails, and other identifying factors had been changed to pseudonyms or general references before the final study was published to preserve the anonymity of the participants. Lastly, any data shared with my supervisor and the translator was done through the written permission of the participant via the consent form.

3.7 Limitations

The findings of the current research are limited to the scope of this research. Potential perceivable constraints may include time limit for interviews both for me as the researcher and participants. Due to the deadlines set for the completion of the study, the short period of data collection caused haste. Additionally, time restrictions were a reason for a number of participants as well. My cultural and experiential background as a researcher also has biases and ideologies that could have influenced the interpretation of this research. For researchers, hearing and understanding the point of view of others may be one of the most difficult challenges they face, and I was no exception. In this regard, I recognized my personal views so that I could better listen to the participants talk about and reflect on their experiences and understand their perspectives.

Sampling problems due to Iran's unstable conditions and internet filtering affected the progress of my work. Low Internet speed in Iran due to recent socio-political issues caused communication problems. Since this research was conducted over the phone, there were challenges in making long calls. Disconnections caused me and the participants loss of concentration during the interviews. During each interview, the connection was interrupted many times and took a long time to re-establish. I had no choice but to keep stopping the recorder and remind the interviewee what we were talking about after the connection. Additionally, the telephonic interviews limited the connection that participants could make with me as the interviewer. Since the interviews were conducted in the Persian language, difficulties raised in conjunction with translation of data and ensuing discrepancies. Although I got help from an expert to translate the required transcripts and analysis, sometimes it is near impossible and difficult to translate terms from Persian into English (and vice versa) and this can lead to misinterpretation.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This chapter presents an analysis of the primary data collected through participant interviews. Emerging themes are presented, with evidence, to support each sub-theme that address the research question of the role of family and friends in Iranian women's solo domestic travel actualization.

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

The research focuses on the experiences of three women, Sahar, Samira, and Marjan, who have embarked on solo journeys within Iran and with different levels of support from their families and friends. The first case study is Sahar, who receives her family's consent to travel but does not receive their support. The second case study, Samira, receives both her family's consent and support for her journey. The third and final participant, Marjan, decides to travel alone without receiving either consent or support from her family. The names the participants have been assigned for confidentiality reasons. Pseudonyms were used as a way of protecting the identity of participants, in compliance with REB requirements. Each of these women have shared their experiences of the process of making the decision to travel solo, to taking a trip and the eventual response/reactions received from family and relatives upon their return.

Sahar. Sahar is a 37-year-old single woman from Mashhad, Iran. She is the first child in her family and the only daughter with two brothers. She pursued her master's studies in international law and has been working in the field of peace studies for around 10 years, mainly in Iranian NGOs. She has recently established her own institute in this field and is striving to make it more active. Currently, Sahar resides with her parents, but due to her work, she has had to live alone in Tehran for some time. Despite being an introverted person, she values communication and believes that it is essential and beneficial for personal well-being. However,

she also cherishes solitude and enjoys spending time alone, engaging in activities that she finds fulfilling such as solo traveling. Sahar travels solo after receiving her family's consent but without their support for the journey.

Samira. Samira is a 40-year-old woman who grew up in a family of four with a younger brother in Tehran, Iran. She has been married for approximately 20 years and is the mother of a three-year-old daughter. Samira currently works at a bank, where she has gained 15 years of experience. She earned a bachelor's degree in economics and a master's degree in economic systems planning and analysis from Shahid Beheshti University. Additionally, Samira holds a diploma from the ACCE (Association of Certified Chart of Accounts), the official association of British accountants, and is currently studying at its advanced level. Samira is a lifelong learner who enjoys studying and has a passion for traveling. She travels several times a year, both alone and with her family, and sees it as a need rather than a luxury. Samira's family supports her solo travel endeavors, which aligns with her preference for traveling solo with family consent and support.

Marjan. Marjan is a 33-year-old single woman who comes from a traditional family and grew up in Tabriz but currently lives in Tehran with her family including an older brother and parents. Despite the restrictions and challenges she faced growing up, Marjan was determined to pursue her dreams and work hard to achieve them. She studied animal genetics at the University of Tehran and has been working in a laboratory for the past five years. One of Marjan's dreams since she was a teenager was to travel alone. She had her first taste of solo travel when she went on a school trip without her family, and this experience ignited a spark in her. Despite not having her family's consent and support, Marjan continues to travel solo, driven by her desire for independence and adventure. Marjan's story is a testament to the power of determination and

self-reliance. Despite facing challenges and opposition, she has pursued her dreams and found ways to achieve them on her own terms. Her love of solo travel is a reflection of her independent spirit and her willingness to embrace new experiences and adventures.

4.2 Themes and Sub-Themes

Through an analysis of the interviews conducted with the three Iranian women about their experiences of solo domestic travel and the role of friends and relatives in that context, three overarching themes were identified. These themes reflect the ways in which socio-cultural aspects influence and shape the journeys of Iranian women who travel alone. The first theme, “socio-cultural aspects”, refers to the impact of Islamic values, beliefs, and religious conditions on individuals and society. This theme encompasses the ways in which cultural norms and expectations shape the decision to travel alone, as well as the experience of solo travel itself.

The second theme, “travel decision-making process”, focuses on the role of family and financial considerations in the decision to embark on a solo journey. For Iranian women, family support and consent are often critical factors in the decision to travel alone, and many women must navigate familial expectations and concerns about their safety and well-being. Financial considerations also play a significant role, with many women needing to save and prepare financially for their journey.

The third and final theme, “empowering aspects”, centers on the individual and personal factors that motivate women to undertake solo travel. Women who travel alone in Iran often describe their experiences as empowering and transformative, helping them to build self-confidence and independence. This theme encompasses the emotional and psychological benefits of solo travel and speaks to the ways in which women can use travel as a means of personal growth, development, and ultimately promoting mental health.

These themes and sub-themes provide a framework for understanding the experiences of Iranian women who travel alone, and shed light on the socio-cultural aspects that shape these journeys. By examining these themes and sub-themes in more detail, we can gain a deeper understanding of the motivations, challenges, and opportunities associated with solo travel for Iranian women. Figure 1 illustrates these three themes, and the following section details each of these major themes and sub-themes.



Figure 1 The role of family and friends in women's solo travel

Theme 1. Socio-cultural Aspects

The analysis of the interviews indicates that the theme of socio-cultural aspects is an important dimension of the solo travel experiences of Iranian women, which highlights the impact of cultural norms, values, and religious beliefs on their journeys. In the context of my research case studies, Marjan, Sahar, and Samira all had different experiences with this theme. More specifically this theme emphasizes the aspects of Iranian society and culture that affect women's

experience in travel. According to Moghadam et al. (2009), Culture means the ways of life of members of a society or groups of society. Culture includes the way of dressing, customs of marriage and family life, work patterns, religious rituals, recreation, and leisure. The culture of a society includes both intangible aspects such as ideas, thoughts, and values that make up the cultural content, and tangible aspects such as objects, symbols, or technology (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003). In the current Iranian culture, some behavioral patterns and cultural stereotypes about girls and women among Iranian families have caused limitations in their cultural, social, and economic activities, while the capabilities of women in various fields have been proven many times (Moghadam, 2007).

Taking all these points into consideration, four sub-themes emerged under “theme of Socio-cultural Aspects” 1) Iranian collectivist culture, 2) contradictions within cultural values, 3) safety concerns and measures, and 4) religious conditions. These sub-themes demonstrate the unfavorable situation of traveling in my case studies. All three participants believe that cultural norms and expectations around women's mobility and independence affect their solo travels. They all face different degree of opposition or disapproval from people around them, but the difference is how their families react and behave within such cultural norms. Indeed, all participants agree that socio-cultural aspects are serious challenges for Iranian women and their desire for personal autonomy in terms of traveling. Even with more progressive attitudes towards women’s mobility, cultural norms and expectations play a role in shaping these women's travel decisions; however, their family members are able to resist such socio-cultural norms and support their daughters or wives.

Iranian Collectivist Culture

Research participants, Sahar, Samira, and Marjan stated that Iranian society is deeply rooted in a collectivist culture. They explain that being born into relatively large families comes with many duties and responsibilities to gain and sustain the support of family and friends. They also recognize that dependence on people is more of a moral type, and beliefs and thoughts are predetermined based on this collectivist culture. In the participants' view, individual identity is defined in a collective of family members, relatives, and friends, where family ties are highly respected. They mention the fact that with the value of kinship relations, the issue of honor is very important. Honor in Iranian culture is a valuable category in social relations, and in all decision-based matters, people think and act in terms of maintaining their honor, reputation, and character in their respective collective and society at large.

As women who have embarked on solo journeys within Iran, the research participants know that their travel decisions are also intertwined with the issue of reputation. This means, in order to maintain their reputation and social position, they value and act in accordance with the opinions of others, especially to maintain their place in social relations and kinship. Sahar, Marjan, and Samira recognize that it can be challenging to navigate these cultural norms while also pursuing their personal goals and dreams. Overall, this sub-theme illustrates the participants' insight into the social and cultural aspects that impact women's solo travel within Iran, including the importance of maintaining one's reputation and position in society, and the challenges and opportunities that arise in this context.

This sub-theme is characterized by aspects such as being influenced by relatives and close friends and the high importance of the family's opinion. In this type of culture, people have many duties and responsibilities towards their social network, and dependence on others is considered

more of a moral obligation than an individualistic choice. One important aspect of collectivist culture is the high value placed on the family's opinion. This means that in this process, individuals are expected to consider the opinions and feelings of their relatives and close friends. This is especially true in matters related to personal reputation, honor, and social status. For the women interviewed, making a decision about traveling alone required obtaining positive opinions from their relatives in order to achieve their goals. In this context, **Marjan**, one of the interviewees, expressed the following:

"I even remember that my mother and my aunt are like this, and they are very easily influenced. I remember about the trip to Shaft village that I got the family's consent, but I don't know what my aunt talked to my mother about, even though they themselves had reserved my accommodation, I don't know what happened, they said again no you can't go!..., and I had to put a lot of energy and talk again, but they were easily influenced by the words of my aunt or friends or close relatives."

The statement reflects Marjan's view about the impact of Iranian collectivist culture on women's solo travel, particularly in terms of the influence of family and close relatives. The participant's statement indicates that her mother and aunt are easily influenced by the opinions of others, and that this influence affected her ability to travel alone. The participant recounts an experience where she obtained the family's consent for a trip, but later faced resistance from her mother and aunt. The participant believes that her aunt may have influenced her mother's opinion, which caused the family to reverse their initial decision to allow her to travel. This situation highlights the importance of obtaining not only the family's consent but also their support in order to pursue solo travel as a woman in Iranian culture. It also illustrates how the opinions of close relatives and friends can have a significant impact on decision-making processes. In other words, this statement

provides insight into the challenges faced by women who wish to travel alone in Iran, as they must navigate the expectations and opinions of their family and social network.

The problem has a deeper facet when the family itself is also controlled by other social norms like relatives and other friends' opinions. This is because maintaining the family's reputation and honor within the Iranian collective culture is a significant factor in shaping the family's opinions regarding the woman's travel. In this regard, Marjan states that:

"When relatives and close friends asked my family why she traveled alone and she likes to travel alone, they (parents) seemed to get upset very quickly. Well, it was very important to them, that is, maybe if they were alone, these issues would be between them and me, and the words of others and relatives and friends didn't matter to them, maybe they wouldn't be so strict about a girl traveling alone." {Marjan}

In this statement, Marjan explains that her family and relatives did not prioritize her desire to travel for leisure, and instead placed more importance on their opinions and the opinions of others. Indeed, the family may be more lenient if they were alone and did not have to worry about the judgment of their social network. She added in this regard:

"It happened several times that I got help from one of my aunts to talk to my mother and she agreed to my travel, but even this itself seems to be something temporary... Even the second time I asked another aunt to help to talk to my mother about going to the village of Shaft, my aunt didn't even accept and said that "if something bad happens to you and something goes wrong, I can't mediate for you" {Marjan}

Marjan describes how her family members have conflicting attitudes towards her desire to travel alone, which is influenced by cultural values and norms surrounding women's mobility and independence. This is also the case in an advanced stage of the travel planning and preparation,

when the participant was ready for the travel, but the family did not understand her critical situation. Initially the family gave the consent for their daughter's travel, but when one of the aunts intervened, she easily changed the family's mind. This statement highlights the importance of obtaining the approval and support of the relatives and friends in the participant's travel actualization. In addition, Marjan describes how she had to seek help from her other aunts to convince her mother to allow her to travel, which suggests that her mother is not entirely supportive of her solo travel plans. However, Marjan's aunt refused to help her in the second instance, highlighting her the safety concerns about women's solo travel. Her aunt's fear of being held responsible for any negative outcomes of Marjan's solo travel is a reflection of the broader societal concern about women's safety when traveling alone. This fear is not unfounded, as women traveling alone can be at higher risk of harassment, assault, or other forms of harm. Marjan notes that even with the help of her aunt to talk to her mother about her desire to travel, it is only a temporary solution and that after the trip, everything will likely return to the way it was before. This highlights the underlying cultural barriers that Iranian women face when it comes to solo travel, and the fact that even when family members are supportive, there is still a strong societal pressure that can make it difficult for women to exercise their autonomy and independence.

Overall, Marjan's statement adds to the whole picture of the challenges faced by Iranian women who wish to travel solo, which is shaped by a complex interplay of cultural values, family dynamics, and safety concerns. In addition to social norms and its impact on women travel, the prevailing cultural attitudes towards women's solo travel in Iran also shapes women's lives. The belief that women need a companion to travel with is deeply ingrained in the culture, and this view is often reinforced by family members and society at large. Women who choose to travel solo are often seen as breaking social norms, and this can result in disapproval and opposition from others.

The collectivist culture in Iran emphasizes the importance of social cohesion and interdependence, and this can make it challenging for women to pursue their individual goals and aspirations. Women's solo travel is often viewed as a threat to the family and community's social fabric, and this can lead to resistance and pressure to conform to traditional gender roles. **Sahar** stated in this context:

"Those who like to travel are usually very excited and enthusiastic, in a way that you say to yourself, wow! what decision have I made, what am I doing!...Those who are not travelers or just travel with family or others, they usually ask questions that you have to explain why you are going. I mean, at first, they think that we have to! It's not that you make this choice for yourself and then they try to help you make your trip the way they think is pleasant."

In this statement, Sahar explains that the existing perspective on women's solo travel in Iran further emphasizes the impact of cultural barriers on women's travel decisions. The collectivist culture in Iran makes it difficult for women to travel alone, even with the acceptance of their family and relatives. This suggests that while family support is important, it may not be enough to fully overcome the cultural barriers and societal expectations that limit women's ability to travel independently. Nevertheless, the interviewee claims that solo travel can be a transformative and enriching experience for women. Women who choose to travel solo can gain new perspectives, develop their independence and self-confidence, and challenge social norms and expectations. However, this requires overcoming cultural and social barriers, and may require the support of family and allies. In addition, the quotation suggests that the excitement and enthusiasm expressed by those who enjoy solo travel contrasts with the more hesitant and cautious attitudes of those who do not travel frequently or who prefer to travel in groups. This suggests that there may be a cultural

divide between those who prioritize personal autonomy and independence, and those who prioritize social cohesion and conformity to societal norms.

Another important point in the context of women's solo travel is the perception and acceptance of solo travel for unmarried and married women. Generally, unmarried women face more social restrictions and scrutiny when it comes to solo travel, as there is a perception that traveling alone could potentially jeopardize their reputation or honor. This is because unmarried women are expected to conform to social norms and expectations, and there is a greater emphasis on preserving their purity and chastity. However, even for married women, there can be cultural barriers to solo travel, such as concerns about leaving their family responsibilities behind or potential judgment from others for traveling without their spouse. In the same vein, **Samira** shares her own experience as a married woman who has the support and permission from her husband,

"Something that exists, for example, I saw a lot of negative reactions from my mother-in-law in many of these events, and even, for example, trips were canceled, because she thought that such a thing was not possible to go on a trip alone and come back easily without any serious problems for a single woman in our culture...And don't cause problems for the family in the future...She had a bad perspective about me and didn't trust me."

Samira's quotation highlights the significant influence of family members, particularly mothers-in-law, in determining whether or not a woman is allowed to travel alone in Iranian culture. The speaker's mother-in-law is depicted as having a negative perspective towards solo travel for women, believing that it is not safe for a married woman to travel alone and that it may cause problems for the family in the future. This attitude reflects a broader cultural belief that even married women should not travel alone and underscores the importance of familial approval and support for married women who wish to engage in solo travel. The speaker's mention of canceled

trips due to her mother-in-law's disapproval also highlights the potential impact of these beliefs on women's agency and ability to pursue their goals and desires, even though she has the approval of her husband. In addition, Samira highlighted the deeply ingrained skepticism regarding women's solo travel in Iranian society, even among women themselves. The straightforward explanation for this sentiment is that when a woman travels alone, she is perceived to be outside the protection of a male guardian and therefore vulnerable to corruption, even when engaging in a solo recreational trip within the same society.

Another point in the collectivist culture sub-theme is about a strong emphasis on the role of women as wives and mothers, and their obligation to prioritize their familial duties over personal pursuits. This belief is often used as an excuse to prevent women from traveling alone, as it is seen as neglecting their duties to their spouse and family. This view is reinforced by influential family members, such as the mother-in-law, who may hold traditional beliefs about women's roles in society and family. In this regard, Samira, the only research participant who is married, claims that,

"For example, since they don't like it, they don't support me. My mother-in-law could say she can support her son not to be alone, to serve food and in general, for the reason of trip that I'm not available...But his mother will never do this. It wasn't a support that would probably show my husband that he's not alone when I'm not around and suggest that he can more easily eat with his family."{Samira}

In this statement, Samira highlights the lack of emotional support she receives from her husband's family regarding her solo travels. She suggests that her mother-in-law could have used the opportunity to bond with her son while Samira is away, but instead, she chooses not to offer any support. Samira's statement highlights how her role as a wife affects her relatives' opinions

about her solo travel. Indeed, despite the satisfaction of the interviewee's husband and immediate family with her solo travel, other members of the family may still show their displeasure or even attempt to prevent her from traveling alone. This highlights the challenges that women face in balancing their personal desires with societal expectations and familial obligations. Finally, although it is not possible to easily distinguish personal intentions and obsession with worry from some opinions, in both cases it means making an excuse for destruction or making a change in the decision for a solo trip, especially about a married woman.

Contradictions within Cultural Values

There are several contradictions within cultural values in the context of Iranian women solo travel. This means there are mixed feelings and generally negative attitudes towards solo women's travel throughout the country. The negative attitudes towards solo travel for women in Iran are shaped by gender discrimination and gender roles that define a woman's place in society. This issue has been among the most important sub-themes in the interviews. This sub-theme identifies the discourses around women's value in Iranian patriarchal society where the social progress could not completely alleviate the issue. The contradictions create a sense of shame and embarrassment in women and position women's decisions to travel alone against their collective societal values.

In line with these explanations, research participants also express that they are often expected to remain close to home and are discouraged from venturing out on their own. Interviewees demonstrate that expectations are deeply ingrained in Iranian culture and affect how women are viewed by society. These women feel that their decisions to travel alone are seen as a rejection of collective societal values. **Marjan** has expressed her feelings in this regard as follows:

"Another issue is that from a social point of view, what was worrying for me was the reaction of the culture in which I am going to travel. In other words, in addition to the fact that my family was considered a barrier, the culture of my destination was also worrying for me... if they ask I was alone, I had to say no, I am not alone!"

Marjan's quotation highlights the challenges that Iranian women face when it comes to solo travel. Her statement reflects the broader cultural expectations that Iranian women are discouraged from venturing out on their own and are expected to remain close to home. Marjan expresses her concern about the reaction of the culture in which she is traveling, indicating that negative attitudes towards solo travel for women exist. Marjan's statement also reveals the social pressure and scrutiny that Iranian women face when they travel alone. She notes that she felt compelled to deny traveling alone because of the judgmental attitudes of others, indicating that the stigma against women who travel alone is deeply rooted in Iranian society.

In addition to the previous point, participants also mention that women are considered the second gender and weak in Iranian society, creating significant barriers for women who wish to travel solo. According to the interviewees, many people in Iran view women's solo travel as antithetical to women's dignity, and women who choose to travel alone risk damaging their credibility and reputation within their communities. The fear of losing respect and facing judgment from others can be a significant obstacle for Iranian women who want to explore the world and pursue their dreams. This perception that women are weak and in need of protection further reinforces the idea that women should not travel alone and need the supervision of a male family member to ensure their safety. In the following, **Marjan** states:

"The words of my friend's mother were in this regard, since Marjan travels alone, she opposes everything, and it seems that she has separated herself from her family and goes

with her own opinion and acts against the advice of her family and doesn't listen to them, that's why their communication with me became less and less, so they didn't want me to communicate with them."

This statement highlights the negative social attitudes and judgment that women who travel solo in Iran may face. The interviewee expresses how her decision to travel alone has caused her friends' families to view her negatively, as someone who opposes everything and goes against the words of her family. This perception creates a sense of shame for the interviewee, as she is seen as violating collective societal values. The interviewee notes that her friends' families were afraid that she would have a bad influence on their daughters, and that their daughters might also start to experience such trips and oppose the family. This highlights the underlying gender discrimination in Iranian society, where women's mobility and independence are often viewed as a threat to traditional gender roles and patriarchal values.

In addition to the previous points, research participants claim that gender roles and discrimination have a significant impact on Iranian women's ability to travel solo. In their views, Iranian society is deeply patriarchal, with traditional gender roles dictating that women should be responsible for domestic duties and caretaking, while men are free to pursue personal interests. This traditional view of gender roles often leads to negative attitudes towards women who travel alone, as it is viewed as a rejection of collective societal values. In the same, **Marjan** points out:

"The main problem was the opinion of the people around me! The position of a girl and the perspectives of people about a girl who is traveling alone is not interesting at all in Iran. For example, my dad does not consider my brother's travel as a problem. Freedom in mobility is my brother's right at home, but when it comes to me as a woman, traveling is not acceptable and intolerable...And the gendered things that exist in Iranian society..."

This quotation highlights the gender roles and discrimination that exist in Iranian society. The speaker notes that her family and friends have negative opinions about her traveling alone while her brother can travel without a problem. The speaker compares her experience to that of her brother, noting that he is free to travel without facing the same scrutiny and judgment as she does. This highlights the double standards and unequal treatment that women face in Iranian society. The speaker's father, like many others in Iranian culture, seems to hold traditional views about gender roles, which dictate that women should be more restricted in their mobility than men.

Safety

The issue of women's solo travel in Iran is a complex and multi-faceted one, with cultural contradictions being intertwined with concerns about safety. On the one hand, Iranian culture places great emphasis on hospitality and the welcoming of guests, regardless of their gender. On the other hand, it is not necessarily considered appropriate for women to travel alone, particularly outside of urban areas. From the point of view of the participants, this contradiction creates a tension for women who wish to travel independently, as they must navigate the expectations of their culture while also ensuring their own safety.

The third sub-theme focuses specifically on the safety concerns of the interviewed women who travel solo in Iran. This category includes several different factors that contribute to the overall safety of these women, such as the need for increased security measures, the difficulty of finding comfortable facilities for solo women in Iranian culture, and the security of their residence. The interviewee's statements shed light on the cultural opposition and safety concerns that they face when traveling alone or in a group of friends in Iran. The societal expectation that women should not travel alone or with friends of the opposite gender, coupled with concerns about safety, create

significant barriers for these women who wish to travel independently. This issue was shown in **Marjan's** interview:

" Now, as a girl, the situation was much worse. In the case of trips with friends, this is always the issue again. The question was(is), what is your relationship with each other? If the friends were girls, there was a concern that it would not be a safe environment outside. If there was a boy among us, then this was mentioned: What is your relationship that you are traveling with each other, and they don't believe that we don't have a relationship".

The participant's claim highlights the need for increased security measures for Iranian women solo travelers from her family's point of view. The need for safety is a major factor for all tourists and travelers, but it is especially important for women travelers. Women travelers face unique challenges when it comes to safety, including gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and assault. These risks can be particularly high in certain destinations, especially in areas with high rates of crime or areas where women are not respected or valued equally. The societal expectation that women should not travel alone or with friends of the opposite gender originates in concerns about safety. This implies that the current security measures are not adequate to ensure the safety of women traveling alone or with friends. Additionally, the pressure from family members to conform to these expectations suggests a lack of trust in the security measures that are currently in place.

For women who choose to travel solo in Iran, the cultural norms and expectations can pose significant challenges and increase feelings of vulnerability and fear. This is particularly true in traditional tourist destinations, where cultural and religious customs are often more strictly observed. Women may feel that they stand out and attract unwanted attention, which can lead to harassment and discrimination. In accordance with participants' claims, the concern about women

solo traveler's safety in Iran is rooted in the country's traditional culture and patriarchal norms. These factors can make it challenging for the women to travel independently and may require extra precautions to ensure their safety and well-being. In this context, the interviewee stated:

"I was worried about safety; I was trying not to say that I came alone. It applies more in smaller cities, and for example, I remember in Kandovan, they asked me once if I was alone. I said no, I came with my friend and my husband, and they went shopping but it wasn't true! and because I was worried, I preferred to answer in this way." {Marjan}

The participant's quotation emphasizes the concern about safety that women solo travelers may experience, particularly in smaller cities in Iran. The participant felt that it was necessary to lie about traveling alone in order to avoid drawing attention to herself and potentially putting herself in a vulnerable position. The statement also highlights the pressure that women may feel to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations in Iranian society. By claiming that she was traveling with her friend and husband, the participant was conforming to the expectation that women travel with male companions for their safety. The interviewee also suggests that women may feel a sense of isolation and helplessness when traveling alone in Iran. She mentions that she felt worried and preferred to answer in a way that would minimize the risk of drawing unwanted attention. This underlines the extra responsibilities that women may feel they need to take on to ensure their safety when traveling alone, which can be a source of stress and anxiety.

Another important point in the context of safety in travel is the lack of suitable conditions for women traveling solo in Iran which can make it difficult for them to determine their place of night stay. Women may feel unsure of where they can go and what facilities are available to them, and these limitations can increase feelings of vulnerability and anxiety. Based on the research participants' claims, this highlights the need for more support and resources for women traveling

solo in Iran, including accommodations and facilities that are specifically designed to meet their needs. In the same vein, Samira shares her own experience:

"Unfortunately, this issue is one of the biggest challenges. Even in hotels, if you want to go and get a room, if you are single and not married, they won't give you one." {Samira}

The participant's claim emphasizes the challenges that solo female travelers may face in Iran when trying to find suitable accommodations. The participant shares her own experience of being turned away from hotels because she was traveling alone and not married at that time. This indicates that the cultural norms and laws in Iran around gender and marriage can limit the options available to solo female travelers and make it more difficult for them to find safe and comfortable places to stay. The participant's statement also suggests that the lack of suitable accommodations for solo female travelers is a systemic issue that extends beyond just traditional cultural values. Even hotels, which are typically seen as a safe and reliable option for travelers, may not be equipped to accommodate the needs of solo female travelers.

Another issue that strengthens the security of women's solo travel is the security of the place of accommodation. Ensuring the place of accommodation is adequately secure is an essential component of travel planning. Tourists need to be able to trust that the accommodation they choose is secure and that they will not face any safety risks while staying there. According to the participants' point of views, when traveling alone, the place of accommodation is likely to make the person feel the most exposed vulnerability. If the place of accommodation is not secure, it can negatively impact the traveler's experience and even deter them from returning or recommending the destination to others. For women, who may face additional safety concerns when traveling alone, this is particularly important. In this context Sahar said:

"Unfortunately, one of the concerns that we have in Iran has two aspects. There is a concern about safety. I mean, this security is, unfortunately, less for women in Iran. Sometimes the family is worried about your safety, and sometimes when you also feel insecure in your residence...I have had experiences from my place of residence that I decided to never go alone there!" {Sahar}

The interviewee, Sahar, is expressing her concern about the safety of women traveling solo in Iran. She highlights two aspects of this concern - first, the actual travel security situation in Iran, which she suggests is less safe for women than men. Second, she mentions the worry that her family and herself have for her safety when she travels alone. Her statement about feeling insecure in her place of accommodation also suggests that there may be a lack of safety and security measures in place, which may make her feel uncomfortable and hesitant to travel alone in those areas. based on Sahar's statement, it appears that the sense of insecurity for women traveling alone in Iran is amplified by societal norms and lack of accommodation infrastructure. For example, some female travelers may prefer to stay in all-female dormitories or hostels, but these options may not be widely available or accessible in all destinations. Similarly, female travelers may feel more comfortable using transportation services that have female drivers or are exclusively for women, but these options may not be available in all places. Overall, the lack of infrastructure that can accommodate the needs of solo female travelers can exacerbate the concerns and fears of women who wish to travel alone, as well as the concerns of their families.

Religious Conditions

This sub-theme elaborates on the impact of religious beliefs of people and the strict laws of Islam for women on Iranian society. The religious and Islamic context of Iran, and the attitude towards women to carry out daily activities and life, has made women face different challenges.

From the point of view of the participants' family and friends, women traveling alone is a modern act and is indicative of westernization. Since all the participants are Iranian, they have been influenced by Islamic culture and religion, which tends to be traditional and conservative. Therefore, the interviewees admitted that the struggle between tradition and modernity has occurred in families, and traditional and modern values are fighting each other.

The first point emerged during the interviews was Islamic rituals as big obstacles to the representation of women in the Iranian society. The participants in this study claim that their relatives hold Iranian Islamic beliefs that make women's travel morally wrong. Additionally, such beliefs hold the idea that women's solo leisure tourism conflicts with their basic duty of housekeeping, child-rearing, and keeping safe and protected from society and the public eye. Therefore, it is not permissible for women to travel alone or otherwise except to perform obligatory duties such as visiting relatives, pilgrimage, or work purposes. In this context, the interviewee states:

"I remember one of my travels that I went to a city in the northwest where the people speak Turkish and are culturally different and have a lot of prejudice." {Sahar}

According to the participants in this study, one of the main obstacles to women's representation in Iranian society is the Islamic beliefs that are held by many people. These beliefs dictate that women's travel, especially alone or for leisure purposes, is morally wrong and conflicts with their traditional role of being responsible for housekeeping, child-rearing, and staying safe and protected from society and the public eye. The participant suggests that the societal expectations placed on women in Iran are based on religious and cultural beliefs that limit their freedom to travel and pursue their own interests. The interviewee may feel that this is unfair and unjust, and that women should have the same opportunities as men to explore the world and engage in leisure activities.

Also, the statement mentions that these religious rules have caused an intangible competition in Iranian families to keep girls away from social and physical harm, and women's chastity is at the top of social values.

Another point is about the Islamic laws in Iran that restrict women's mobility. Such Islamic rules are influenced by cultural and traditional beliefs about the role of women in society, particularly with regards to marriage and family. In this context, **Marjan** said:

"The main reason for my family's opposition is that I am single. In Islamic society, a single girl has a lot of restrictions due to the protection she gets before marriage. The sentence they keep saying is that once you get married, do whatever you like. Well, even then it has its own conditions!"

The interviewee is a single woman, and in Islamic society, unmarried women are often subject to strict social norms and rules around behavior, dress, and mobility, as they are considered to be in need of protection. The interviewee's family's opposition to her travel plans may stem from their desire to protect her from perceived risks and dangers that come with traveling alone as a single woman. The family may believe that it is not appropriate for an unmarried woman to travel without the protection of a male from family or husband. However, the interviewee acknowledges that even after marriage, there are still conditions and restrictions on women's mobility, suggesting that these restrictions are deeply rooted in the cultural and religious traditions of Iranian society.

In addition to the points stated above, legal and religious restrictions also affect Iranian women's travel. Under Iranian law, women and girls who have not yet reached the age of legal adulthood must obtain permission from their parents or legal guardian to travel abroad. This law is based on Islamic religious laws that require women and girls to seek the consent of their husband, father, or legal guardian before traveling. The requirement for women and girls to obtain

permission before traveling is rooted in cultural and traditional beliefs that view women as needing protection and guidance from male relatives. In this context, the interviewee said:

"It is true that my financial situation did not allow me to travel abroad. But if I had the financial affordability, I wouldn't have permission from my father obviously!" (Marjan)

The statement suggests that Iranian women face legal and religious restrictions when it comes to traveling abroad, particularly if they are unmarried. Marjan's statement also suggests that even when women can gain financial independence, they may still be subject to patriarchal control and limited autonomy when it comes to their travel plans. This reflects broader issues around gender inequality and the need for greater empowerment and agency for women in Iranian society.

Theme 2. Travel Decision-making Process

The decision-making process for women who want to travel alone in Iran included two important steps. The first step is obtaining a travel permit (verbally), which requires satisfying the family. As it is represented in literature, in many traditional societies such as Iran, family members play a crucial role in women's decision-making processes (Nyaupane & Andereck, 2007). This can involve convincing their families that they will be safe and secure while traveling alone. Without family support, women may face difficulty in obtaining a travel permit. The second step is providing travel facilities and requirements, which are mainly related to financial issues. Women need to have the necessary financial resources to cover their travel expenses, including transportation, accommodation, and other related costs. Financial resources can also help women feel more confident and independent while traveling alone (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003). This means that women need to have the necessary financial resources to be able to travel alone. The participants suggest that financial affordability is a prerequisite in the decision-making process. Therefore, the two sub-themes of financial affordability and family support were highlighted in

the decision-making process of the participants. It can also be concluded that the two sub-themes of family support and financial affordability are interconnected. In other words, women who have the support of their families may find it easier to obtain the necessary financial resources to travel alone.

Financial Affordability

Research participants stated that when making the decision to travel alone as an Iranian woman within Iran, it's important to consider financial affordability. In terms of financial affordability, it is important to assess the overall cost of the trip, including transportation, accommodation, food, and any other activities or excursions that may be of interest. They point out that due to the limited or uncertain support from families for solo female travel, having access to sufficient funds is necessary to plan and carry out independent travels. The interviewees claim that women who are not employed face difficulties in this regard. The choice of transportation, accommodation, public and private vehicles, food, health, and other necessities all depend on financial resources. Women in this study suggested it is also important to include a budget for unforeseen expenses in addition to the predicted travel expenses. Overall, this sub-theme highlights the financial challenges that the women interviewed face when planning solo travel in Iran and the need for careful financial planning and budgeting to ensure a successful trip.

This sub-theme is characterized by aspects such as lack of financial support, the need for detailed financial planning based on schedule, and taking time to cover travel expenses. Women in Iran may not have the financial support they need from their families to travel solo. Based on the participants' claims, this can be due to cultural norms or expectations, financial constraints, or concerns about safety. Without financial support, women may struggle to cover the costs of transportation, accommodation, food, and other travel expenses. Moreover, all the participants

expressed that women who want to travel solo in Iran need to engage in detailed financial planning to ensure they can cover all their expenses. This includes creating a budget, identifying sources of income or funding, and planning their travel itinerary around their financial resources. They may need to prioritize certain expenses over others, such as choosing budget-friendly accommodation or transportation options. Lastly, women may need to take time to save up enough money to cover the costs of their solo travel. This may mean delaying their travel plans until they have enough money saved or seeking out part-time employment or other income sources to supplement their funds. It also means being patient and taking the time to carefully plan their trip to ensure they can afford all the expenses associated with solo travel. For the right to choose and make decisions, women may have reasonably strong financial potential of their own. For the participants in this study having financial independence, increases the possibility and actualization of independent travel for them. They did not receive financial support from their family, which suggests that they faced financial challenges in planning and executing their trips. The experience of the interviewee in this respect is expressed thus:

"Of course, because I wasn't supported financially, that means my family had less support for me in these matters and caused me challenges... I always paid my own expenses and saved money, and it didn't matter much if they agreed or disagreed, because I was doing my own business..." {Marjan}

The quotation emphasizes Marjan's lack of financial support, which caused challenges for her. Lack of support is apparent in the statement and reflects the speaker's struggle to pursue her goals without any support from the family. Due to the participant's financial independence, her ability to manage her own finances and take care of herself without relying on anyone else is highlighted. Marjan reflected her autonomy and independence in making her own decisions, despite not

receiving any financial support from her family. Despite the challenges caused by the lack of financial support, the participant remained persistent and focused on her goals which reflects her determination to succeed and overcome the obstacles she faced.

According to the participants, women who wish to travel solo in Iran must engage in thorough financial planning to ensure they can afford all their expenses. This entails developing a budget, identifying potential sources of income or funding, and strategically planning their travel itinerary around their financial limitations. To make ends meet, they may need to prioritize certain expenses, such as selecting more economical lodging or transportation alternatives. In this regard, **Sahar** states that,

"The next issue is finance, which is a very important issue. Deciding how much to spend because there are different ways to go on a trip...It depends on your planning and financial ability to travel, and the place you are going to may not have a multi-star hotel, and you should use eco-tourism accommodations, which are sometimes more exciting than hotels"

Sahar emphasizes the importance of finance in decision-making process and planning a trip. She states that it is a crucial issue that needs to be considered carefully before making any decisions about the trip. This quote highlights the need for travelers to carefully plan their expenses and allocate their financial resources in a way that meets their needs. The speaker mentions that there are different ways to go on a trip, such as backpacking or staying in a multi-star hotel. This emphasizes the importance of considering different travel options based on the traveler's financial ability as well as the place they plan to visit. Sahar also mentions that the place a traveler is going to may not have a multi-star hotel, and they may need to use eco-tourism accommodations which highlights the importance of considering alternative accommodation options that may be more affordable or sustainable.

In addition to the previous points, research participants claim that one of the challenges faced by women in Iran is the lack of financing travel plans, particularly due to financial dependence on families, resistance from families, and the resulting postponement or abandonment of travel plans. In this regard, **Samira** claims that:

"Well, in Iran and Iranian families, since you can work at an older age and after graduation, you are dependent on your family for the financial aspects of travel until that time, and when they don't agree with such trips, sometimes they refuse to provide financial assistance. And you may even postpone your trip for this reason or give up completely."

The woman in this study suggests that in Iran, young people are financially dependent on their families for travel until they can work and earn money themselves. This reflects the challenges faced by young women who want to travel but are not financially independent which is rooted in the cultural and social barriers faced by women in Iran when it comes to traveling independently. Due to the lack of financial support from their families, women may have to put their travel plans on hold until they are financially independent or may give up their travel aspirations altogether. This can be a significant setback for women who want to explore new places, meet new people, and gain new experiences. This point emphasizes the impact of financial constraints on women's ability to pursue their travel aspirations.

The process of financial affordability can be a time-consuming and challenging endeavor in the decision-making process, particularly for women who aspire to travel independently. In Iran, where cultural and social norms may discourage women from traveling alone or without the support of their families, financial affordability is often necessary to achieve this goal. As highlighted by women in this study, the process of saving money to fund travel plans may take

months, but the passion and determination to pursue travel goals can serve as a driving force for women to attain financial independence. In this context, Marjan, expressed the following,

"One of the challenges I had when traveling was financial issues and not having enough money. With the allowance money I received and of course, the amount was not significant, I had to give up on some of my expenses and save my money to be able to travel. And that would take maybe a few months." {Marjan}

The assertion represents the challenges faced by travelers in terms of limited financial resources and the need for budgeting and financial planning. This is a common challenge faced by many travelers, particularly those who are on a tight budget or traveling independently without the support of their families. The participant suggests that budgeting and financial planning are essential skills for travelers, especially those who are on a limited budget. Her claims also emphasize the time-consuming nature of the financial affordability process, which may require women to sacrifice and save money for a long time to achieve their travel goals.

Family Support

Decision-making is a complex and often challenging process that individuals go through in their daily lives, particularly when it comes to making important life choices. One of the areas where decision-making can be particularly challenging is in the context of travel, especially for women who choose to travel alone. This decision can be even more daunting for Iranian women due to cultural and societal norms that discourage solo travel, especially for women. In this context, one sub-theme that emerges as a critical factor in the decision-making process for Iranian women considering solo travel is family support. The influence of family on the decision-making process can be significant, particularly in cultures where family ties are strong and intergenerational

support is valued. In Iran, family support, or lack thereof, can significantly affect a woman's decision to embark on a solo travel journey.

While family support can be a source of motivation and encouragement, it can also be a source of prejudice, resistance, and negative perspectives. These characteristics were raised in the research participants' claims. One of the elements that influenced the decision-making process of the Iranian women interviewed in this study was family prejudices. In accordance with the interviewees' assertions, Iranian women who choose to travel alone may face resistance from their families, particularly from older generations, who hold more traditional views about women's roles and responsibilities. Another point that impacted Iranian women's decision-making process was the long process of obtaining parental and family consent. According to the women interviews, obtaining parental and family consent can take time and may involve lengthy negotiations, particularly if the family members hold different views on the matter. Finally, negative perspectives of family members were also a significant factor that influenced the decision-making process of Iranian women who chose to travel solo. The interviewed women expressed that parents' negative perspectives can arise from a variety of reasons, including concerns about safety and security, fear of losing face in the community, or the belief that solo travel is not a suitable activity for women. These negative perspectives can create tension and conflict within families and may cause women to feel discouraged and unsupported in their travel plans.

Traditional beliefs that consider solo travel as unsuitable for women can also influence families' attitudes towards the women traveling alone. In accordance with participants' views, these traditional views are often held by older generations who adhere to more conservative values and believe that women should stay at home or travel only in the company of a male family member. In this context **Samira** points out:

"Because my father was a military man, it was not acceptable for him that I want to travel alone, especially before marriage."

Samira's quote reveals family prejudices and cultural expectations in Iran. Traditional gender roles and expectations is evident, as the interviewee's father, who was a military man, held more conservative views about women's roles and responsibilities. These views likely influenced his daughter's decision to travel alone, as he may have considered it inappropriate or unsafe for an unmarried woman to travel without a male family member. Familial influence is also present, as the participant suggests that her father's disapproval played a significant role in her decision-making process. Although safety and security concerns are apparent, the interviewee's father may have been concerned about the family's reputation and the perception of his daughter traveling alone, as this could potentially bring shame or embarrassment to the family.

According to the women interviewed, obtaining parental and family consent can be a lengthy and complicated process that involves negotiations and discussions with family members who may hold different views on the matter. The participants explained that in Iranian culture, the concept of "family honor" is highly valued, and the opinions and decisions of the family as a whole are often considered more important than individual desires or aspirations. This means that women who want to travel alone may have to navigate a complex web of social and cultural expectations and may need to obtain the approval of their parents, siblings, and other family members. In accordance with women's claims in this study, negotiations and discussions between family members can take time and may involve compromises and concessions on both sides. Women who want to travel alone may need to demonstrate their maturity and responsibility, provide assurances about their safety and security, and address any concerns or objections raised by family members. In the process of obtaining her family's consent, **Marjan** mentions the concern of her parents:

"The most crucial thing for me was the family's point of view. I knew what they thought about their daughter's solo trip...It's always a long period of discussion. I had a long time of arguments with my family and that period was always one of my worries...."

Marjan's assertions highlight the important role that family dynamics can play in the process of obtaining consent. She expresses her concern about her family's opinion and their involvement in the decision-making process regarding the daughter's solo trip. The quote suggests that obtaining consent may not always be a straightforward process, particularly when family members have different perspectives or values. The quote implies that obtaining consent can involve extended periods of discussion, negotiation, and even arguments. Moreover, the statements underline the importance of considering the family's point of view in the consent process. It suggests that the views and concerns of family members may need to be addressed in order to obtain informed and timely consent. Overall, the interviewee's explanations underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of the consent process and the need to consider the broader context in which decisions are made, particularly with regards to family dynamics and relationships.

This study has shown that family support plays a crucial role in the decision-making process of Iranian women who choose to travel solo. Based on the interviewees' views, negative perspectives from family members can create significant obstacles and may lead to tension and conflict within the family. The negative perspectives of family members towards solo travel for the women interviewed can stem from various concerns, including safety and security, fear of losing face in the community, or cultural beliefs that suggest that women should not engage in such activities. As a result, women who choose to travel solo may face resistance from their families, which can lead to tension and conflict within the family. The lack of family support can cause these women to feel discouraged and unsupported in their travel plans. This can lead to a

sense of isolation and limit their opportunities for personal growth and development. Furthermore, negative family perspectives can also reinforce cultural and gender-based stereotypes that suggest that women's mobility should be restricted, which can have long-term implications for women's empowerment. In this context, the interviewee states:

"Whenever I returned, I had to endure a period of displeasure and bad moods from my family. Because I had done something that they disliked, and usually this was repeated in all trips, whether alone or in a group with friends, but the problem was that when I was alone this issue was much more intense" {Marjan}

The participant's claim indicates that parents' negative perspectives can be particularly strong in cases of solo travel. The negative attitudes and disapproval from family members can create a sense of guilt, shame, and discomfort for the woman who chose to travel solo. The repeated nature of this issue expresses that it is not an isolated incident but rather a recurring problem for the speaker. It may also indicate that the parents' negative perspectives are not just rooted in concerns about safety and security but may also reflect broader cultural and social beliefs about gender roles and mobility for women. Moreover, this quote highlights the emotional toll that parents' disapproval can have on women who choose to travel solo. It underscores the need to address negative perspectives and to promote greater understanding and acceptance of women's solo travel, particularly in cultural contexts where gender roles and mobility are contested issues.

The challenges that married women face when traveling alone can be profound, even when they have the consent of their spouses. In accordance with the participants' experiences, despite having their husband's support, they are not immune to negative attitudes and beliefs about women traveling alone, especially from their husband's family members. This underscores the broader cultural and social norms that can limit women's mobility and agency, even when they have the

support of their immediate family members. In this context, Samira, the married interviewee, expressed the following,

"Every time I returned from a trip, my husband's family would get angry with me and make excuses, but I was fully aware of this. They behave in such a way that they hurt my feelings and even interfere in my marital relations. " {Samira}

This quotation reflects the negative experiences that the woman faces when returning from solo trips, specifically related to the disapproval and criticism she receives from their husband's family. Samira expresses that she is fully aware of their negative attitudes towards her solo travel and that their behavior hurts her feelings and even interferes with her marital relations. This highlights the potential for negative attitudes towards women's mobility and the wider consequences beyond just the individual woman's experience, affecting relationships with others as well. It also underscores the importance of addressing negative attitudes towards women's solo travel, not only for the benefit of individual woman but also for the health of wider social relationships and structures.

Theme 3. Empowering Aspects

For the women in this study, solo travel represents a form of empowerment, allowing them to break free from cultural constraints and gain a sense of freedom and positive emotions. In Iran, where societal and cultural norms often prioritize the collective over the individual, women solo travel is still considered a taboo (Shahvali et al., 2016). More specifically, this theme emphasizes the positive outcomes of women's solo travel can have on women's life. One empowering aspect of solo travel for the women interviewed was the opportunity to develop a sense of self-confidence and self-reliance, which is commonly referred to as independence. By navigating unfamiliar environments and overcoming obstacles on their own, women who travel solo may gain a newfound sense of inner strength and independence. This sense of empowerment can translate into

other areas of their lives, allowing them to break free from cultural and societal expectations and pursue their personal goals and ambitions. Mental health, another sub-theme, related to the potential positive impact that solo travel could have on the women's psychological wellbeing. The participants reported that travel can serve as a form of self-care, allowing individuals to take a break from the stresses and demands of everyday life. Solo travel may also provide a sense of empowerment and self-confidence, leading to increased self-esteem and overall mental wellbeing. Overall, the participants in this study highlight the potential benefits of solo travel for women, particularly in contexts where societal and cultural norms may constrain their choices and opportunities.

Independence

This sub-theme encompasses various aspects that contribute to the empowerment of solo female travelers. These include practical independence, gained through the experience of navigating unfamiliar environments and overcoming obstacles; real-life practice, where travel becomes a valuable life lesson; intellectual independence, achieved through exposure to diverse cultures and new perspectives; and self-confidence, developed as a result of overcoming challenges and relying on oneself. Together, these elements form a comprehensive framework for understanding the transformative power of solo travel for women. The women interviewed in this context found that by venturing out into unfamiliar territories alone, they were able to cultivate a strong sense of independence. All the participants in this study shared the belief that the patriarchal and traditional structure of Iranian society often marginalizes women in decision-making processes. Consequently, women typically have to seek approval from their families even for personal decisions. However, they also noted that solo travel offers a unique opportunity for women to break free from such constraints. As per their perspective, traveling alone presents

situations where women can make independent choices regarding basic needs such as food, accommodation, and how they spend their time. This freedom from the need for approval or alignment with others' thoughts and opinions empowers women and allows them to act with greater independence. Hence, solo travel can be seen as a means of promoting personal growth and self-discovery for women.

The initial aspect within the sub-theme of independence concerns practical independence. As expressed by the women in this study, practical independence was a major benefit of solo travel that was gained through the experience of navigating unfamiliar environments and overcoming obstacles. By facing and surmounting challenges on their own, solo female travelers develop a greater sense of self-reliance and self-assurance. They have learned to trust their instincts, make independent decisions, and handle unexpected situations with confidence. This practical independence gained through solo travel can have a profound impact on a woman's personal and professional life, allowing her to approach challenges with greater resilience and resourcefulness.

Sahar refers to the boldness practical independence in solo travel:

"My freedom of action is much greater in solo trips. I can easily change the plan and change my decision at the moment, contrary to what has already been determined. On these trips, I provide more opportunities for my feelings and stay more in the moment instead of the future or past. I want to enjoy living in the moment. So, I can easily remove, replace or even add parts to the program."

The participant's statement highlights the aspect of practical independence gained through solo travel. By traveling alone, the participant is able to make decisions and alter plans based on her own feelings and desires, without needing the approval or alignment with the thoughts and opinions of others. This level of autonomy and flexibility in decision-making allows her to fully

embrace the present moment and prioritize her own needs and desires. This newfound freedom of action enables her to create a travel experience that is tailored to her own interests and preferences, without being constrained by the expectations or demands of others. Overall, this participant's experience illustrates how solo travel can foster practical independence by empowering women to take charge of their own experiences and make decisions based on their own intuition and desires.

Another point in the independence sub-theme was about real-life practice, where travel became a valuable life lesson. The interviewees assert that real-life practice refers to the idea that solo travel provides a valuable opportunity for them to gain practical experience and learn important life lessons. Accordingly, unlike theoretical learning, real-life practice involves actively engaging with the world around us and learning through hands-on experiences. Through solo travel, females were able to navigate new environments, meet new people, and confront unexpected challenges, all of which can serve as valuable life lessons that translate into other areas of their lives. By actively engaging with the world in this way, women interviewed have developed important skills such as adaptability, problem-solving, and communication, which were crucial for their success in both personal and professional contexts. In this context, the interviewee says:

" These trips helped me grow in my personality and the interaction I had with people. On my travels, I met people who had different social position...And you get to know them better and talk about different issues and learn a lot from everyone...all those experiences are very practical in my real life" {Marjan}

Marjan is reflecting on how her travels have impacted her personality and social interactions. She mentions that she has had the opportunity to meet people from different social positions and has been able to learn from their experiences and perspectives. The interviewee also notes that these experiences have practical applications in her real life. This statement suggests that the participant

has gained valuable insights and knowledge from her travels, particularly regarding interacting with people from diverse backgrounds. Marjan appears to value the importance of learning from others' experiences and perspectives, which has helped her grow as a person. Overall, this statement suggests that the speaker has had positive experiences through traveling and interacting with people from different walks of life, and that these experiences have had a meaningful impact on her personal growth and development.

In addition to the points stated above, intellectual independence was a key aspect of solo travel for women interviewed, as it provided a unique opportunity for exposure to diverse cultures and new perspectives. This exposure to new ideas and ways of thinking can be a powerful catalyst for intellectual independence, as it encourages women to think critically and independently about their own beliefs and values. By challenging their own assumptions and biases, the participants could develop a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the world and became more confident and self-assured in their own intellectual abilities. Sahar has expressed her feelings in this regard as follows:

"I think enjoying life is a skill that must be learned, and I realized that I found this pleasure in discovering details during my solo trips. I achieved mental preparation, and the ability to show flexibility during unexpected events and control emotions in different situations within other cultures and several opposite perspectives, and every trip is a wonderful opportunity to strengthen these factors..." {Sahar}

From an intellectual independence perspective, this statement highlights the importance of being open-minded and adaptable in new and unfamiliar situations. By developing skills such as mental preparation, flexibility, and emotional control in different cultural contexts, the participant has gained a greater degree of independence and autonomy in navigating and enjoying her travels.

Additionally, the interviewee's emphasis on discovering details suggests a curiosity and desire to learn, which are important aspects of intellectual independence. By seeking out new experiences and perspectives, the woman is expanding her knowledge and understanding of the world. This quote suggests that solo travel can be a valuable way to develop important skills and abilities that contribute to intellectual independence and personal growth. Overall, solo travel can be a powerful tool for achieving intellectual independence, as it encourages individuals to broaden their horizons and engage with new ideas and perspectives in a meaningful way.

The final point raised by the participants was self-confidence which was developed because of overcoming challenges and relying on themselves. When traveling alone, the females had to navigate unfamiliar environments, interact with strangers, make decisions independently, and solve problems on their own. These experiences can be both empowering and challenging, but they ultimately lead to a greater sense of self-confidence and self-reliance. Through solo travel, women in this study learned to trust their instincts, assess risks, and make decisions based on their own judgment. They also learned to cope with unexpected situations and challenges, which helped them build resilience and adaptability. The experiences of Samira show that she gained more self-confidence after experiencing solo travel:

"One of the most important reasons for my solo trips was the independence and being able to do everything from zero to one hundred by myself and be responsible for everything... All those trips helped me a lot to become a very responsible person and lower my expectations from others. Well, all this made me do it with pleasure and many times. I'm sure I will share all those experiences with my daughter in the future!" {Samira}

The first sentence suggests that Samira has intentionally embarked on solo trips as a means of cultivating her sense of independence. By traveling alone, she was solely responsible for her own

well-being, decision-making, and problem-solving. This kind of self-reliance can be an empowering experience, as it allows the woman to build confidence in her own abilities and judgement. The next sentence, which mentions being responsible for everything, further emphasizes the participant's commitment to self-reliance. By taking full ownership of their experiences, women are better able to develop a sense of agency and control over their lives, which can be a powerful tool for building self-confidence. Samira also notes that these solo trips have helped her become a more responsible person. This suggests that she has internalized the idea that taking care of oneself is an important aspect of personal growth and development. This kind of responsibility can be an important component of self-confidence, as it allows individuals to feel competent and capable in the face of life's challenges. Finally, the interviewee mentions that she has lowered her expectations of others as a result of the solo trips. This suggests that she has learned to rely less on external validation and support, and instead has cultivated a greater sense of self-reliance and self-sufficiency. This kind of mindset can be a powerful tool for building self-confidence, as it allows individuals to feel more in control of their own lives and less reliant on the opinions and actions of others. Overall, the woman interviewed suggests that her solo trips have been an important means of cultivating self-confidence, by providing her with opportunities to develop independence, responsibility, and a sense of self-reliance.

In line with the previous points and explanations, the research participants also express that trips have made them more independent and self-assured, allowing them to confidently make their own decisions and say no to others without feeling obligated to seek approval or validation from them. In this regard Sahar explains her feelings as follows:

"This is what made me easily say no to the people around me whenever I want. The trips made me more independent, which means that I rarely feel like I must see what my mom or

my friend thinks. I get a lot of advice, not for the reason they approve me or not, not to say dos and don'ts to me, but because I know that different minds see different angles, I think my mother can add strength to my thoughts, and I say, well, let me make it stronger, but I don't want to get approval. " {Sahar}

Sahar's assertion underlines several important aspects of self-confidence, including independence, assertiveness, and a willingness to seek input from others while maintaining autonomy. The first sentence indicates that she is comfortable saying no to others whenever she wants. This suggests that she has a strong sense of self-awareness and self-assuredness and is confident in her ability to make her own decisions without seeking the approval or validation of others. The next sentence explains that the participant's solo trips have contributed to her sense of independence, which in turn has made her less reliant on the opinions of others. This highlights the importance of personal autonomy in building self-confidence, as having a sense of control over one's own life can be empowering and validating. The quotation also mentions that the woman seeks advice from others, but not necessarily for the purpose of getting approval or being told what to do. Instead, she values the different perspectives that others can offer, and uses these perspectives to strengthen her own thought process. This indicates that the woman in this study is confident in her own decision-making abilities, but also recognizes the value of outside input and is willing to consider alternative viewpoints.

Mental Health

Mental health was a crucial aspect of women's solo travel among the participants, as the experience can be both empowering and challenging, and can have significant impacts on well-being and personal growth. In accordance with the women interviewed in this study, it can be concluded that the mental health benefits of solo travel may include increased self-awareness and

mindfulness, improved stress management and coping skills, and enhanced resilience and adaptability. Additionally, solo travel can provide a sense of accomplishment and self-efficacy, which can help to build self-esteem and confidence. However, it's important to acknowledge that solo travel can also be a challenging and potentially risky experience, particularly for women. There may be concerns around safety, loneliness, and isolation, and these challenges can impact mental health and well-being.

In addition to the mental health benefits mentioned earlier, the women who choose to embark on solo travel in Iran may also experience benefits related to their peace of mind, the health of their soul and body, and their preparation for fear and possible dangers. Firstly, solo travel can provide an opportunity for women to escape from the stress and pressure of daily life and to find peace of mind. This may involve stepping away from the demands of work or family responsibilities, or simply taking time to reflect and recharge. In the current study, women who traveled solo were able to find a sense of peace and clarity that is difficult to achieve in their everyday lives. Secondly, solo travel can also contribute to the health of the soul and body. For the women interviewed, this involved connecting with nature, exploring new cultures and cuisines, or engaging in physical activity such as hiking. Women who travel solo may find that they are able to prioritize their health and well-being in ways that are difficult to do in their everyday lives. Finally, solo travel can also help women to prepare for fear and possible dangers. While solo travel can be empowering, it can also be risky, particularly for women. By taking on the challenge of solo travel, women in this study developed skills and strategies for managing fear and staying safe in potentially dangerous situations. This can help to build confidence and resilience that can be applied in other areas of life. The women who went on solo travels in this study disconnected from daily stress and found inner peace, achieving clarity often missing in their routine. The study

revealed that taking a break from work and family obligations or simply reflecting alone enabled them to attain this sense of inner peace. In this context, **Sahar** says:

"I am a person who likes to travel, and I really need to travel, and by the way, traveling alone! I need it in certain periods of my life, and it can solve many of my problems. Especially with the energy that is transferred to me!"

The participant expresses a love for traveling, suggesting that it brings her joy and satisfaction. This suggests that engaging in activities that one finds pleasurable and personally interesting can contribute positively to one's peace of mind. Sahar states that she needs to travel alone, implying that she seeks solitude during her travels. She also mentions that this form of travel can solve many of her problems, suggesting that it allows for personal reflection and problem-solving. The statement suggests that engaging in activities that provide opportunities for solitude and reflection can contribute positively to one's inner peace. The interviewee notes that traveling alone can transfer energy to her, suggesting that it has a rejuvenating effect. It indicates that engaging in activities that help one recharge and energize can contribute positively to one's peace of mind.

In line with the previous explanations, research participants also express that the renewed sense of life and happiness they experience during and after solo travel can also be seen as contributing to their overall peace of mind. **Samira** asserts about the positive impact of solo travel on her inner peace:

" My first priority from solo travel has always been to achieve peace and strengthen self-awareness and strengthen my character and soul, which I achieved, and every time I travel alone, I grow and it's like I come alive...I can be a strong and influential person among those around me. I am a happy mother and wife. Even in my work environment, I seem to be more productive. It really seems like I'm going a few steps forward with each solo trip."

In this statement, the woman describes the benefits she experienced from solo travel, including achieving peace, strengthening self-awareness, character, and soul. She also mentions feeling a sense of growth and rejuvenation during and after solo trips, which allows her to continue life happily and productively for an extended period. The benefits described by the participant suggest that solo travel can have a positive impact on mental and emotional well-being. Achieving peace and gaining a sense of personal growth can contribute positively to one's peace of mind by reducing stress and anxiety and increasing feelings of contentment and fulfillment. The interviewee's mention of being a strong and influential person among those around her highlights that solo travel can also have a positive impact on interpersonal relationships, which can further contribute to peace of mind. Finally, the woman's observation that she seemed to be more productive in her work environment after solo trips underlines that solo travel may also have a positive impact on professional satisfaction and productivity, which can also contribute positively to peace of mind.

Another point raised by the women interviewed was that solo travel could be a rejuvenating experience for both the mind and body. For the women in this study, connecting with nature through outdoor activities like hiking, camping, or even just a stroll in a park, have had a significant impact on their well-being. Similarly, exploring new cultures and cuisines while traveling solo was a source of inspiration and personal growth. They express that trying new foods and experiencing different cultural practices helped broaden their perspective and increase their empathy towards others. This can contribute to an overall sense of fulfillment and happiness. The participants believed that traveling solo can be an empowering experience for women. It can help them overcome fears and insecurities, build confidence, and develop new skills. These benefits can translate into their daily lives, enabling them to navigate challenges with more ease and resilience. Accordingly, the interviewee asserts:

"I really wanted to get away from everyday life...to reduce some of my work pressure, and this helped to reduce the stress of work pressure and negative thoughts I had every day. Even for a while, I had problems with physical illness that my doctor prescribed me to go on a trip alone and focus on my relaxation so that I can get well soon." {Sahar}

The assertions emphasize the potential benefits of solo travel for both physical and mental health. The woman mentions how she wanted to "get away from everyday life," which suggests a desire for a break from routine and monotony. This is a common reason why people choose to travel solo - to break away from the stresses of everyday life. Furthermore, the woman interviewed also notes that she experienced work pressure and thoughts that added to her stress levels. Traveling solo allowed her to reduce that stress and focus on relaxation, which is essential for both physical and mental well-being. Studies shown that chronic stress can have negative effects on the body, including a weakened immune system, increased risk of heart disease, and other health problems. Moreover, the woman also mentions having physical health problems, which her doctor prescribed solo travel to help alleviate. This underscores the potential benefits of solo travel in promoting physical healing and recovery. Being in a new environment, away from stressors, and focusing on relaxation can aid in physical recovery. Overall, the statement highlights how solo travel can contribute to the health of the soul and body.

While solo travel can be an empowering experience, there are also potential risks and dangers that must be considered. However, according to the women in this study, solo travel can also help them develop skills and strategies for managing fear and staying safe in potentially dangerous situations. Accordingly, the last point that the interviewed women added was that traveling alone helped them to be prepared for fears and possible dangers in different situations. In the study, women reported that their experiences in their solo travels had equipped them with a

greater ability to manage fear and prepare for potential dangers in different situations. This was due to the fact that solo travel often involves venturing into unknown territories, encountering unfamiliar people and cultures, and dealing with unexpected challenges. By being forced to rely solely on themselves and their own resources, the women developed a range of skills and strategies that they could apply in various situations to stay safe and manage any fears or anxieties that arose. This included things like researching their destination in advance, learning how to navigate new environments, and carrying self-defense tools such as pepper spray. Beyond the practical benefits, solo travel also provided the women interviewed with an opportunity to build confidence and resilience, which they could then apply to other areas of their lives. By stepping outside of their comfort zones and facing their fears head-on, the women found that they were able to push their limits and discover new strengths and abilities that they may not have realized they had. **Marjan** expressed her feelings and experiences in this regard:

"After undergoing counseling and receiving advice from others, I gradually overcame my timidity and even fear of being alone in the dark by spending time alone at home and eventually embarking on solo trips. These experiences have been instrumental in building my strength and resilience. While I take precautions by researching my destination and carrying safety equipment, it is the personal growth and development that has been most valuable to me."

This statement highlights the individual's journey in preparing for fear and possible dangers through solo travel. The woman overcame her fears and timidity by seeking counseling and gradually challenging herself to spend time alone at home before embarking on solo trips. By doing so, she developed the necessary skills and strategies to manage fear and stay safe in potentially dangerous situations. These strategies include researching the destination before the trip, making

inquiries to ensure maximum security, and carrying safety equipment. Overall, Marjan's experience demonstrates how solo travel can be an effective way to prepare for fear and possible dangers. By stepping out of one's comfort zone and facing the fears, she was able to develop resilience, strength, and self-reliance that could be applied in other areas of life. Additionally, the participant's approach to taking precautions and staying safe while traveling solo highlights the importance of being prepared and taking steps to mitigate potential risks. This can help to approach other challenges and stressful situations with greater calm and confidence.

Summary

The focus of this chapter was to address the research question regarding the role of family and friends in Iranian women's solo domestic travel actualization. Three main themes were presented to answer this question. The first theme, Socio-cultural Aspects, was divided into four sub-themes: Iranian Collectivist culture, Contradictions within Cultural Values, Safety, and Religious Conditions. The second theme, Travel Decision-making Process, was divided into two sub-headings: Financial Affordability and Family Support. Lastly, the third theme, Empowering Aspects, was divided into two sub-headings: Independence and Mental Health. By thoroughly analyzing each theme and examining the interconnectivity between them, it becomes evident that all the themes have a mutual relationship and can significantly influence each other.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Introduction

According to the feminist researchers in the field of leisure and travel, women's experiences in leisure activities and the limitations they face should always be linked to their personal lives and the socio-cultural environment in which they live; because such a context reveals restrictions that could be experienced in reality (Little, 2002; Wesely & Gaarder, 2004). Tohidi (2017) notes that women's activism and collective organizing have played a significant role in challenging gendered norms and advocating for greater mobility and access to public spaces in Iran. The reported study has sought to achieve this, with a focus on Iranian Muslim women's solo travel and by unravelling the extent of the challenges and limitations of such an endeavor. Given that little research has been done in Iran and beyond, and despite the increasing trend of such type of travel among women, this study intended to address this void. The present research was carried out using qualitative methods and a constructive paradigm towards the data obtained from the personal experiences of Muslim women who live and travel solo in Iran. These narratives of Muslim Iranian women afford insights into the needs, process and challenges associated with aspiring and actualizing independent leisure travels in their own country. To answer the study's research question, the results of the previous chapter will be further examined and compared with the findings of previous research discussed in the literature review. Limitations of the study as well as suggestions for further research on the topic of women's solo travel for recreational purposes are also addressed in this chapter.

Socio-cultural Aspects

This study has attempted to examine some of the lesser perceptible dimensions of socio-cultural influences on the solo travel of young women in Iran. Prior studies that examined the role

of relatives and friends in actualizing women's solo travels have highlighted the role that socio-cultural aspects play in accomplishing their journey. Zamani-Farahani and Henderson (2010) found that the issue of women's solo travel in Iran is complex and multifaceted, encompassing socio-cultural, safety, and religious factors. Yeganeh (2015) further stated that as Iran's deeply-rooted collectivist culture places a strong emphasis on the opinions and feelings of family and social networks, making it challenging for women to pursue solo travel while navigating familial and societal expectations. This study provided empirical evidence of the importance of Iranian collectivist culture, contradictions within cultural values, safety concerns and measures, and religious conditions as socio-cultural aspects in women's solo travel actualization. These subthemes demonstrate the unfavorable situation of traveling in my case studies of Sahar, Samira, and Marjan. All three participants believe that cultural norms and expectations around women's mobility and independence affect their solo travels. Furthermore, they assert that women who choose to travel alone risk facing judgment and losing respect within their communities, reinforcing the idea that women are weak and in need of protection. Accordingly, Riahi (2007) stated that women's autonomy and independence are often limited by patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles, with negative attitudes towards women's solo travel reflecting deeply ingrained gender discrimination.

Safety concerns also play a significant role in women's solo travel in Iran (Karagöz et al., 2021; Shahvali & Safiri, 2023). This study found that women travelers faced risks such as gender-based violence and sexual harassment, while cultural and religious norms created obstacles for their independent travel. Bagheri and Makian (2018) confirm this issue as follows, women are expected to be responsible for domestic duties and caretaking, limiting their ability to travel freely, especially outside urban areas. In this regard, the women interviewed assert that legal and religious

restrictions require women and girls to seek permission from their male guardian before traveling, further limiting their autonomy. In addition to the previous points, this study shows that religious beliefs and strict Islamic laws also impact women's mobility and representation in Iranian society. Islamic beliefs dictate that women's travel is morally wrong, and that their traditional role is to be responsible for housekeeping, child-rearing, and staying safe and protected (Shafaghi et al., 2012; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2014). These beliefs and traditions can limit women's freedom to travel and pursue their interests, thereby reinforcing gender inequality in society. The findings of this research, compared to the findings of other studies, show that the solo travel of women in the collectivist society of Iran has a direct relationship with socio-cultural issues, which includes several social, cultural, safety and religious aspects.

Travel Decision-making Process

The decision-making process for women who want to travel alone in Iran is influenced by factors such as family support and financial affordability (Azani & Zal, 2019). Javidan and Dastmalchian, (2003) assert that financial affordability is a key consideration, as women need to have the necessary resources to cover travel expenses and feel confident and independent while traveling alone. However, financial constraints can limit women's ability to pursue their travel aspirations.

Participants in this study provided evidence for this assertion that budgeting and financial planning are essential skills for travelers, especially those on limited budgets. Financial independence was an important factor that could impact a woman's ability to travel alone. Women who have financial independence had greater control over their decisions and were not limited by the financial constraints imposed by their families. They were free to plan their trips based on their own preferences and budget, without having to rely on their families or others for financial support.

These findings are consistent with Simonetti (2011), who found that this can give women a greater sense of autonomy and freedom, which can be empowering and lead to a more fulfilling travel experience.

The study shows that obtaining a travel permit and ensuring family support are critical first steps for women who want to travel alone. According to Yeganeh (2015), the decision-making process for women who want to embark on solo travel, particularly in cultures where family ties are strong, is strongly influenced by family support. Family support can be a source of motivation and encouragement, but it can also be a source of prejudice, resistance, and negative perspectives. Iranian women who choose to travel solo may face resistance from their families, particularly from older generations who hold more traditional views about women's roles and responsibilities (Nikjoo et al., 2021). The participants in this study provided evidence that obtaining parental and family consent can be time consuming and may involve lengthy negotiations, particularly if family members hold different views on the matter. Negative perspectives from family members can create tension and conflict within families and may cause women to feel discouraged and unsupported in their travel plans. Furthermore, the women in this study claimed that negative attitudes towards their mobility can have wider consequences beyond just their experience, affecting relationships with others such as spouse, relatives, and friends. These findings align with Hosseini et al. (2021), emphasizing the significance of addressing negative attitudes towards women's solo travel, not only benefits the women but also the health of wider social relationships and structures.

The findings from this study suggest that there is a need for greater understanding and acceptance of women's solo travel, particularly in cultural contexts where gender roles and mobility are contested issues. This requires a shift in cultural attitudes and beliefs about women's

autonomy, safety, and security (Papoli Yazdi & Dezhmakhoo, 2014). The study also underlines the need for greater family support and involvement in the decision-making process for women considering solo travel. Family members' concerns and perspectives are taken into account, but not at the cost of women's agency and independence. A supportive family environment can elevate women's travel experiences and contribute to positive social and cultural change (Poopale Ratthinan & Selamat, 2018; Shahvali & Safiri, 2023). In addition, the study underscores the significance of promoting women's solo travel as a means of empowerment, self-discovery, and personal growth. By encouraging and supporting the mobility of women in the family, it is possible to create a more equitable and inclusive society that values women's autonomy and agency (Siyamiyan Gorji et al., 2021). The findings of the current research suggest that family support and financial affordability are interconnected, and women who have the support of their families may find it easier to obtain the necessary financial resources to travel alone.

Empowering Aspects

This study suggests that solo travel can be a form of empowerment for women, allowing them to break free from cultural and societal expectations and pursue their personal goals and ambitions. The women interviewed spoke about the positive outcomes of women's solo travel on their lives. One empowering aspect of solo travel for them was the opportunity to develop a sense of self-confidence and self-reliance, leading to increased self-esteem. In the same vein the literature highlights the potential benefits of solo travel for women, particularly in contexts where societal and cultural norms may constrain their choices and opportunities (Bianchi, 2016; Pung et al., 2020). Contributing to this body of research, the participants in the study shared the belief that the patriarchal and traditional structure of Iranian society often marginalizes women in decision-making processes. However, they also noted that solo travel offers a unique opportunity for women

to break free from such constraints. Solo travel can be seen as a means of promoting personal growth and self-discovery for women (Lew, 2018). This study also suggests that solo travel can foster practical independence by empowering women to take charge of their own experiences and make decisions based on their own intuition and desires without needing the approval or alignment with the thoughts and opinions of others. The findings in this study are consistent with Boone et al.'s (2013) argument that by embracing new experiences and perspectives, women can develop important skills and abilities that contribute to intellectual independence and personal growth.

Overall, the women interviewed in this study believed that solo travel can be an empowering experience that broadens their perspective, increases their empathy towards others, and contributes to their overall sense of satisfaction and happiness. Moreover, the participants' approach to taking precautions and staying safe while traveling solo highlights the importance of being prepared and taking steps to mitigate potential risks. This helped them approach other challenges and stressful situations with greater calm and confidence in their daily life. Aghazamani et al. (2021) found that by managing fear and stress effectively and taking proactive steps to mitigate potential risks, women can build resilience, confidence, and self-reliance that can have practical applications in various areas of their lives.

5.2 Suggestions

To promote gender equality and remove the socio-cultural constraints that limit women's solo travel, this study makes several recommendations. First, facilitating women's solo travel happens by providing convenient employment conditions and increasing the entry of more women into the labor market. This will enable women to achieve financial self-sufficiency, gain higher self-confidence, and boost their decision-making power (Bagheri et al., 2022). Second, promoting women's fundamental and general tourism culture in Iranian society that it should recognize

women's fundamental right to movement and travel, which can be achieved by eliminating misconceptions and stereotypes about women through media, and other educational institutions like family and schools.

To increase women's security while traveling, the study recommends the standard design of public spaces, social surveillance in touristic places, which can allow single women to stay in hotels and residences and providing travel insurance. The study also suggests increasing and improving tourism facilities, including women-only residences accommodation facilities with respect for privacy according to Shariah and social laws. This study recommends conducting practical studies related to women's travel topics and comparing gender needs in creating accommodation facilities for short and long-term trips. These suggestions can help policymakers and stakeholders to promote women's empowerment and gender equality in Iran and other collectivist societies (Bagheri & Makian, 2018).

5.3 Research limitations

The current research on Iranian Muslim women's solo travel faced several limitations that must be considered when interpreting its findings. One of the main methodological problems was the lack of prior qualitative studies in this area, which made it challenging to find appropriate and relevant models for data collection and data analysis and consumed a lot of the researcher's time. It also led to challenges in the interpretation of the findings, as there was no clear framework or set of guidelines for analyzing the data. This has been resulted in a longer and more time-consuming process of developing a suitable analytical approach that was not ideal for the study's time and resource constraints.

Another limitation was the time constraint, which had limited the data collection period and resulted in a smaller number of participants. This could have potentially limited the

generalizability of the findings to the larger population of Iranian Muslim women. As a result, I had to work quickly to gather as much information as possible. However, this approach may have led to potential oversights or biases in the data collection and analysis. In this regard, prioritizing specific aspects of the research topic that were most relevant to the study's goals and research question have helped to ensure that the limited time available was used effectively. Moreover, I have clearly defined the research question and hypothesis before data collection to reduce the chances of subjective interpretation of results. Rigorous data quality control procedures, such as double-checking data entry and member checks were implemented to ensure data accuracy.

Additionally, the study was conducted over the phone due to communication problems caused by recent socio-political issues in Iran and COVID-related hurdles, which limited the participants' ability to connect with me as the interviewer and could have affected the quality of the data. Participants might have felt more comfortable and open if the interviews were conducted in person. Additionally, the phone interviews have been limited by technical issues such as call quality, network connectivity, and time zone differences. These factors may have made it challenging to establish rapport with the participants, which might affect the quality and depth of the data collected. To address the communication limitations caused by conducting the study over the phone, I as the researcher could have considered alternative methods of data collection if it was possible. For example, conducting interviews in person or over video conferencing platforms may provide better opportunities for building rapport and facilitating communication. I could also have consider providing clear instructions to participants on how to ensure call quality and minimize technical issues.

Moreover, there was a general lack of research on the obstacles faced by Iranian women in tourism, especially on socio-cultural aspects and this could have limited the scope of the study and

made it harder to draw conclusions. Without a comprehensive understanding of the challenges Iranian women face in traveling solo, the study may have missed crucial nuances of their experiences. Additionally, the absence of relevant literature may have made it challenging to compare and contrast the study's findings with those of previous research, making it difficult to build on existing knowledge. To address the limitation of the lack of prior research, I explored a more diverse range of literature from different regions and cultures close to Iranian culture. This could provide insights on the broader context of the topic and identify potential similarities and differences between the experiences of Iranian women and those of women from other cultures.

Finally, during the interviews conducted in Persian, language-related challenges arose, especially during the translation process into English. These challenges affected the accuracy of the data collected and analyzed, necessitating multiple revisions. The translation from Persian to English may have caused the loss of nuances, cultural references, and idiomatic expressions unique to the Persian language. Consequently, this may have impacted the accuracy and clarity of the presented data, leading to potential misinterpretations by readers who are not familiar with Persian culture and language. As a non-native English speaker, conveying the participants' experiences and perspectives accurately in writing in English presented additional challenges, which could have resulted in issues with clarity and coherence in the final written report or presentation. To address these language-related issues, I considered hiring a professional translator fluent in both Persian and English to ensure the translation's accuracy and consistency.

5.4 Summary

In conclusion, this study has examined and documented the challenges and limitations of Iranian Muslim women's solo travel, considering the socio-cultural environment in which they live. The study has found that women's solo travel in Iran is restricted by various socio-cultural

aspects, including collectivist culture, safety concerns, patriarchal norms, and religious beliefs. The decision-making process for women who want to travel alone in Iran is influenced by aspects such as family support and financial affordability. On the one hand, family support is crucial for obtaining a travel permit and consent, and on the other hand, financial resources are necessary for covering travel expenses and making women feel more independent while traveling alone. The study found that solo travel empowers women by allowing them to break free from societal expectations and norms and pursue their goals and achieving independence and psychological well-being.

The study provides insights into the needs, process, and challenges associated with women's independent leisure travel in Iran and highlights the importance of addressing socio-cultural constraints to promote gender equality and women's autonomy. Future research on this topic can focus on developing interventions to address the cultural and social norms that limit women's independent travel in Iran and other collectivist societies. Additionally, it is a significant contribution to the literature, as it provides practical guidance for policymakers and other stakeholders interested in promoting women's empowerment in Iran and other collectivist societies. Compared to previous studies, the uniqueness of the current study lies in its focus on women's solo travel in Iran, specifically examining the socio-cultural aspects that limit solo travel for women for leisure purposes. This study highlights the complex decision-making process for women who choose to travel alone, and the various challenges they face. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of financial independence and budgeting skills for female travelers, which is a unique contribution to the literature on women's travel in Iran.

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Appendix A: Themes and Sub-Themes

1. Socio-Cultural Aspects

a. Iranian Collectivist culture

- i. Being influenced by relatives and friends
- ii. The importance of family opinion

b. Contradictions within Cultural Values

- i. Society's negative attitude towards women's travel
- ii. the prevailing gender attitude in society
- iii. The negative view of destination people

c. Safety

- i. The need for more security for women
- ii. The difficulty of obtaining comfort facilities for solo women in Iranian culture
- iii. The security of the residence.

d. Religious Conditions

- i. The religious beliefs of the people
- ii. The strict laws of Islam for women in Iranian society

2. Travel Decision-making Process

a. Financial Affordability

- i. Lack of financial support
- ii. The need for detailed financial planning based on schedule
- iii. Taking time to cover travel expenses

b. Family Support

- i. Family prejudices
- ii. The long process of obtaining parental and family consent
- iii. Negative perspectives of parents

3. Empowering Aspects

a. Independence

- i. Practical independence
- ii. Real life practice in travel (life lesson)
- iii. Intellectual independence
- iv. Self-confidence

b. Mental Health

- i. Peace of mind
- ii. Health of soul and body
- iii. Preparation for fear and possible dangers

Appendix B: Interview Guide

The interview questions will be justified as follows:

First, I want to ask you some background questions so that I can provide a summary of your life as a participant and also get a general picture of your life before starting the main topics.

1. Can you please describe/share how many travels you have undertaken by yourself in Iran? Can you speak to each of those travels in terms of where and why you went? *Determining the number and type of trips can provide the researcher with in-depth information about the relationship between the participant's perspective with the perspectives of family and influential people in her decision-making. Additionally, the role of family and friends can be explored.*
2. Can you describe what compels/makes you undertake these journeys by yourself? For example, when you went on each journey, what made you decide to go alone? *The answer to this question identifies specifically the personal need (urge) and necessity for women to travel alone – probably to experience unencumbered travel and to gain self-confidence besides relying on their personal decision-making to travel alone.*
3. What do you think are your travel needs when you plan/prepare to take such solo journeys? Can you describe your preparations for your independent journeys and stay? *Assessing needs from the interviewee's point of view before the trip and her understanding and discoveries during the trip can indicate the change and intensification of her motivation to face solo trips in the future.*
4. Can you please describe for me any personal and/or social concerns that you had to deal with in planning your independent/singular travels? Why do you think that these concerns exist? *Existing social and individual restrictions on women's solo travel and their effects on the quality and quantity of women's solo travel will be identified.*

5. Please describe how you have addressed your concerns in your previous travels? Of all your concerns, which one was the hardest and easiest one to overcome? *Examining and identifying obstacles and types of women's dealings with problems, as well as classifying them based on importance and priority, can make the experience of removing obstacles and hindering causes in women's solo journey available to others as a possible solution and suggestion.*
6. Could you describe the events and reactions of others when you announced your interest in traveling alone around Iran? *How family members deal with a person's interest in travel can play an important role in satisfying them and accepting the issue contrary to the family's former behavioral norms toward women's solo travel.*
7. Would you be able to affirm that your friends and family encouraged (or discouraged) you to take a journey all by yourself? Please share some of your experiences in this regard in terms of their support in preparing for your travels. *The level of participation, cooperation, or influence of the family to accept women's solo travel can greatly contribute to the etymology of the collectivist culture as an obstacle or facilitator in travel decision-making and implementation.*
8. Can you reflect and narrate your feelings and thoughts on traveling all by yourself? Can you please narrate your satisfaction or dissatisfaction with your different travels? *Experiencing solo travel for the first time determines intellectual images or common assumptions about women and can modify the mentality of people to consider such trips.*
9. Could you describe your perceptions and experiences (similarities/differences) on traveling alone versus with others? Please describe in what ways could these past travel experiences affect your future travels. *Exploring the impact of solo travel and the experience of recreation on the individual's interactions with others will show the effect of solo travel on themselves, the positive or negative effects of which will be visible in the behavior and perspective of a person.*

Appendix C: Persian Interview Guide

ابتدا می‌خواهم چند سوال پیش زمینه‌ای از شما بپرسم تا بتوانم خلاصه‌ای از زندگی شما بعنوان شرکت کننده را ارائه دهم و همچنین تصویر کلی از زندگی شما بدست بیاورم.

1- لطفاً توضیح دهید که چند سفر در ایران به تنهایی انجام داده‌اید؟ آیا می‌توانید درباره هر یک از آن سفرها از نظر

اینکه کجا و چرا رفته‌اید صحبت کنید؟ تعیین تعداد و نوع سفرها می‌تواند اطلاعات عمیقی در مورد رابطه بین دیدگاه شرکت کننده با دیدگاه خانواده و افراد تأثیرگذار در تصمیم‌گیری وی در اختیار محقق قرار دهد. علاوه بر این، نقش خانواده و دوستان نیز قابل بررسی است.

2- آیا می‌توانید توضیح دهید که چه چیزی شما را وادار می‌کند که این سفرها را به تنهایی انجام دهید؟ به عنوان

مثال، وقتی به هر سفری می‌رفتید، چه چیزی باعث شد که تصمیم بگیرید تنها بروید؟ پاسخ به این سوال به طور خاص نیاز (اصرار) و ضرورت شخصی زنان را برای سفر به تنهایی مشخص می‌کند - احتمالاً برای تجربه سفر بدون محدودیت و به دست آوردن اعتماد به نفس علاوه بر تکیه بر تصمیم‌گیری شخصی خود برای سفر به تنهایی.

3- وقتی برای چنین سفرهای انفرادی برنامه‌ریزی می‌کنید/آماده می‌شوید فکر می‌کنید چه نیازهایی برای سفر دارید؟

آیا می‌توانید آمادگی خود را برای سفرهای مستقل و اقامت خود توضیح دهید؟ نیازسنجی از دیدگاه مصاحبه شونده قبل از سفر و درک و اکتشافات او در طول سفر می‌تواند نشان دهنده تغییر و تشدید انگیزه وی برای رویارویی با سفرهای انفرادی در آینده باشد.

4- لطفاً می‌توانید نگرانی‌های شخصی و/یا اجتماعی را که در برنامه‌ریزی سفرهای مستقل/انفرادی خود با آن دست و

پنجه نرم می‌کردید، برای من توضیح دهید؟ به نظر شما چرا این نگرانی‌ها وجود دارد؟ محدودیت‌های اجتماعی و فردی موجود در سفر انفرادی زنان و تأثیرات آن بر کیفیت و کمیت سفر انفرادی زنان شناسایی خواهد شد.

5- لطفاً توضیح دهید که چگونه نگرانی‌های خود را در سفرهای قبلی برطرف کرده‌اید؟ از بین همه نگرانی‌های شما،

غلبه بر کدام یک از همه سخت‌ترین و کدام یک آسان‌ترین بود؟ بررسی و شناسایی موانع و انواع برخورد زنان با مشکلات و همچنین طبقه‌بندی آنها بر اساس اهمیت و اولویت، می‌تواند تجربه رفع موانع و علل بازدارنده در سفر انفرادی زنان را به عنوان راه حل و پیشنهاد ممکن در اختیار دیگران قرار دهد.

- 6- زمانی که اعلام علاقه کردید برای سفر انفرادی در ایران، می‌توانید اتفاقات و واکنش‌های دیگران را توصیف کنید؟ نحوه برخورد اعضای خانواده با علاقه فرد به سفر می‌تواند نقش مهمی در جلب رضایت آنها و پذیرش موضوع برخلاف هنجارهای رفتاری سابق خانواده در قبال سفر انفرادی زنان داشته باشد.
- 7- آیا می‌توانید تأیید کنید که دوستان و خانواده‌تان شما را تشویق کرده‌اند (یا دلسرد کرده‌اند) برای اینکه به تنهایی سفر کنید؟ لطفاً برخی از تجربیات خود را در این زمینه از نظر حمایت آنها در آماده‌سازی سفرهایتان به اشتراک بگذارید. میزان مشارکت، همکاری یا تأثیر خانواده برای پذیرش سفر انفرادی زنان می‌تواند به ریشه‌شناسی فرهنگ جمع‌گرا به عنوان مانع یا تسهیل‌کننده در تصمیم‌گیری و اجرای سفر کمک زیادی کند.
- 8- آیا می‌توانید احساسات و افکار خود را درباره سفر انفرادی منعکس و روایت کنید؟ لطفاً رضایت یا ناراضایتی خود را از سفرهای مختلف خود بیان کنید؟ تجربه سفر انفرادی برای اولین بار، تصاویر فکری یا فرضیات رایج در مورد زنان را تعیین می‌کند و می‌تواند ذهنیت افراد را برای در نظر گرفتن چنین سفرهایی تغییر دهد.
- 9- آیا می‌توانید تصورات و تجربیات خود (شباهت‌ها/تفاوت‌ها) را درباره سفر انفرادی و در مقابل آن، سفر با دیگران را توضیح دهید؟ لطفاً توضیح دهید که این تجربیات سفر گذشته چگونه می‌تواند بر سفرهای آینده شما تأثیر بگذارد. بررسی تأثیر سفر انفرادی و تجربه تفریح روی تعامل فرد با دیگران، تأثیر سفر انفرادی را نیز بر فرد نشان می‌دهد که تأثیرات مثبت یا منفی آن در رفتار و دیدگاه فرد قابل مشاهده خواهد بود.