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## You Have to Take Risk: Women's Perceptions of Fear in Female-only Travel and Their Coping Strategies

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### ABSTRACT

With the beginning of gender studies over two decades ago, issues such as inequality, constraints, and women's perceptions of fear, risk, threat, and security have gradually been included by researchers in social and tourism fields. The aim of this study is to investigate women's fears while traveling and their strategies to deal with those fears. A qualitative approach was used and in-depth semi-structured interviews with 19 middle-class female participants based in Mashhad were conducted. In the process, three types of fear (structural, social and personal) and three types of coping strategies (structural, social and personal) were identified. In this classification, "structural" fears or coping strategies refer to their sources or methods involving social, physical and spatial structure of a tourist destination. "Social" fears and strategies refer to emotions and reactions appear through interactions. "Personal" fears and coping strategies are related to the realm of cognitive and personal choices, preferences, abilities, and initiatives. Findings show that although women experience fears due to their subjective perception, the objective conditions of tourism environment and social construction help them put up some kinds of active or passive resistance. They understand the fear as an empowering tool. These experiences differ in terms of quality and depth from western context, and Iranian women have more conservative orientations, but Iranian women they follow a similar path.

**Keywords:** geography of fear, single-gendered tourism, tourist gaze, women's security, travel

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## INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the most favorable leisure activities in many countries and among all socioeconomic classes. However, the existing body of research shows that the accessibility of all individuals and social sub-categories to leisure and tourism is not equal (Rojeck, 2005).

Gender inequality limits women's access to leisure opportunity. Women's unequal access to tourism may come from a variety of sources, including their unequal access to financial resources, leisure time and spaces. Research show that women experience more fear and insecurity than men for a variety of reasons and this is a barrier to women traveling alone or in female-only groups. Consequently, women are unequally deprived of positive psychological, social and economic outcomes of travel. This is more critical in Iran where the women employment rate is low and some ethical norms and division of labor provide less opportunity for outside home experiences. Although, tourism academia started to consider gender inequality, there are less attention to issues of constraints, and women's perceptions of fear, risk, threat, and security in Iran.

## PURPOSE

The first aim of this research is to explore the fears women experience while traveling alone or in female-only groups. The second aim is to investigate strategies women use to cope with their fears while traveling.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was adopted to understand women's perceptions and lived experience. Using the purposive sampling method, 19 semi-structured in-depth interviews with middle-class women in Mashhad were conducted. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The collected data were analyzed through a thematic analysis procedure. In the process, six single women, nine married women and four divorced/widowed ones were interviewed. Their age range was between 20 and 70 years (mean= 42.7). Six cases had high school diploma or less, three cases had undergraduate degree and seven cases had postgraduate degree. In terms of their occupation, eight cases were housewives, nine were employed and two were students.

## FINDINGS

Only one of the participants had solo travel while three traveled with their female relatives and others traveled with friends. In terms of their motivation, four women traveled for pilgrimage, seven traveled for ecotourism purposes and eight cases traveled for pleasure or visiting friend or relatives (VFR). In the course of study, three types of fear (structural, social and personal) and three types of coping strategies (structural, social and personal) were identified. "Structural" fears or coping strategies refer to fears and strategies' sources or methods involving social, physical and spatial structure of a tourist destination. "Social" fears and strategies refer to emotions and

reactions appear through interactions. "Personal" fears and coping strategies are related to the realm of cognitive and personal choices, preferences, abilities, and initiatives. Findings showed that although women experience fears due to their subjective perception, the objective conditions of tourism environment and social construction help them put up some kinds of active or passive resistance and understand the fear as an empowering tool. Furthermore, more educated women and those with more social experience chose active strategies while women with less social experience used passive strategies. It was found that participants typically didn't chose solo or adventure travel rather traveled with group of friends or relatives and often preferred a packaged tour or went to a destination where friends/relatives were waiting for them to host. These strategies reinforced their feeling of security, although they limited women's options and opportunities for female-only travel.

### CONCLUSION

Although participants' experience of female-only travel differs in quality and depth from the western women, and Iranian women had more conservative orientation, their path was similar to the extent. The process of fear showed how personal memories, experiences and socialization process shaped fearful situations and controlled women's coping strategies. Those experiences indirectly developed the process of self-surveillance in women. Findings show that interviewees experienced some fears but they refused to completely submit to social control and self-surveillance. They cautiously went outside of their comfort zone step by step, challenging and evaluating themselves. Subsequently, they improved their subjective and practical capabilities while encountering fears, limitations and low-skillfulness. The female-only travel helped them experience and exert their autonomy with self-determination.

### NOVELTY

Although fears of women travelers in the western context have already been researched upon, such circumstances and coping strategies for women in the semi modern or traditional context of a non-western Muslim culture have not been taken into account if not ignored entirely. This research finding cannot be generalized but findings show that some Iranian middle-class women could challenge their fears in their own way within the existing social framework step-by-step. The tourism industry can design and provide more flexible packages for women to give them more sense of self-governance and self-esteem and less fear. Consequently, this kind of experiences can gradually change the construction of fear among women.



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