

## CHALLENGES FACED BY SOLO FEMALE TRAVELERS IN SRI LANKA

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### INTRODUCTION

Most tourists in today's rapidly expanding global market enjoy traveling away from their homes for leisure and business purposes (Yang, 2021, Samarathunga, 2016). Solo travelers play a significant role in driving tourism as they are trendsetters and promote new destinations. A Solo traveler is a person who embarks on a journey, either long or short, in which they are both physically and emotionally away from the people and the culture that they are familiar with (Sew & Brown, 2018). Among solo travelers, women who value their independence in terms of lifestyle, way of life, and preferences tend to be prominent. Many Asian women who travel alone prioritize family, relatives, and society when making travel decisions (Burglar & Coro Mina, 2021). In an era where inclusiveness is concerned, the literature is relatively silent about Sri Lankan women travelers as it could significantly differ from other cultural settings. Therefore, the main aim of this study is to identify the challenges faced by Sri Lankan solo female travelers and make recommendations to build a solo female travel-friendly culture in Sri Lanka. The study adopts feminism theory, explaining the importance of empowering women to face the modern challenges of living alone (MacKinnon, 1989, Kaplan, 1996).

### METHODOLOGY

Following the interpretivism research philosophy (Williams, 2000), the study employed a deductive research approach (Azungah, 2018) to address the critical research problem using a case study research strategy (Yin, 2011). Accordingly, the study is qualitative research, and the data were collected through focus group discussions, interviews, and observations. As the guidelines Yin (2011) stipulated in identifying cases, two cases, including the Rajarata University of Sri Lanka and the University of Jaffna, were identified as the research context. The two universities are located in two different regions in Sri Lanka, which are culturally, economically, and geographically different.

Data was collected through secondary data sources and semi-structured interviews. Data gathered from the young working and studying ladies, specifically Jaffna, shows that predominantly women encounter significant obstacles due to their travel (Samarathunga et al., 2021). Questions related to the distinct needs of women during the travel, obtaining permissions from the family, budget constraints, making decisions, places visited and interested in visiting, and communication with the hosts were asked in the light of previous literature.

In total, thirteen (13) semi-structured interviews were conducted: seven (07) with solo women travelers from Rajarata University of Sri Lanka and six (06) with solo women travelers from the University of Jaffna. However, six interviews received the most attention as they were identified as information-rich cases. Each interview lasted between ten (10) and thirty (30) minutes based on the solo travel experience of the travelers. The interview questions focus on learning about people's expectations and experiences with solo travel. The mode of conducting

the interviews was both Tamil and English. The interviews conducted in Tamil were translated into English during the transcribing process. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim prior to content analysis. Content analysis systematically identifies, collects, organizes, and presents meaningful patterns across data, allowing one to see and understand collective or shared meanings and experiences (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992).

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The study identified eight (08) principal codes explaining the challenges solo female travelers face in Sri Lanka. The main challenges faced by the female solo travelers are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Challenges faced by solo female travelers in Sri Lanka*

Category development	Open codes
Family barriers	Responsibilities at home: Obtaining permission
Cultural norms	Women should not travel alone; they have a terrible reputation in the family, religious barriers, and dress.
Personal safety	Increased harassment, crimes against women, attitude toward the law
Language barriers	Communicating with non-native speakers, meeting their needs, revealing identity as an outsider
Accommodation issues	Safety of the accommodation; hard to recognize solo-women friendly accommodations; too many men; usage of alcohol
Transportation issues	Unavailability of public transport; increased costs; cannot trust free rides; lack of transport
Isolation	No one to talk to at the hotels; hard to find good company; safety issues at hotels

Family barriers: Most solo female travelers interviewed are married and having babies. They play the role of housewives at home. Thus, they find it challenging to travel solo without being able to find someone who will undertake their duties at home. Correspondingly, female travelers in Sri Lanka must obtain permission from their husbands (if married) or their parents if they live with them.

Cultural norms: In Sri Lanka, traditional gender roles and cultural norms can differ significantly from those in Western societies. Sri Lankan solo female travelers face restrictions that can limit their freedom and independence. For example, the way they dress, limitations on going out alone at night, or societal judgments against women traveling alone.

Personal safety: Safety is a crucial concern for any traveler, and solo female travelers may face additional safety risks, especially in South Asian countries. Issues such as harassment, catcalling, rape, and unwanted attention can be more prevalent in certain parts of the cities. It is essential to be aware of local customs, follow safety guidelines, and take precautions to mitigate risks.

Language barriers: Language barriers can pose significant challenges for solo female travelers in Sri Lanka when communicating with the hosts and the locals. Similarly, the women find themselves in a risky situation once exposed as outsiders and alone. Thus, it is crucial to learn the local language for solo female travelers.

Accommodation concerns: Finding safe and secure accommodation is challenging for solo female travelers in Sri Lanka. Correspondingly, too many men staying in the same place and

using alcohol are additional threats concerning the selection of accommodation units. Thus, it is essential to research and choose accommodations in safe areas, read reviews from other female travelers, and consider staying in women-only hostels or guesthouses if available.

Transportation issues: Searching for convenient transportation, particularly in some rural regions in Sri Lanka, is an exhausting experience for most of the respondents. Solo female travelers often need help with crowded public transportation, late-night travel concerns, or unfamiliarity with local transportation options. Planning routes in advance, using reliable taxi services, and reaching the destinations before nightfall can help alleviate these challenges.

Social isolation: Solo female travelers sometimes feel lonely, and female travelers may feel isolated due to cultural differences, language barriers, or a lack of social connections. Further, after check-in to the hotels, solo female travelers are reluctant to mingle with other guests due to the lack of trust in the other people staying at the hotel.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study revealed significant room for improvement in fostering a solo female-friendly travel culture in Sri Lanka. The lack of government policies, insufficient attention from tourism stakeholders, and the distinct cultural features of Sri Lanka contribute to the country's limited number of solo female travelers. However, literature suggests that Western female solo travelers are more empowered and encouraged to undertake solo travels in Sri Lanka than their Sri Lankan counterparts. Additionally, it was observed that Sinhalese female solo travelers tend to be more assertive and accommodating compared to Hindu female travelers. To promote a solo female travel culture in Sri Lanka, it is recommended to implement new policies ensuring the safety and well-being of travelers. Furthermore, hoteliers should adhere to international standards when accommodating solo female travelers. It is imperative to upgrade the travel infrastructure and facilities to meet the requirements of solo female travelers. Finally, increasing public awareness and supporting solo female travelers during their journeys is essential.

**Keywords:** Solo female travelers, feminism, Sri Lankan women, Sri Lanka tourism, women safety

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