

Gendered Experiences in Tourism: Solo Women Travelers in Rajasthan

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Abstract

The rise of solo female travel has become a significant trend in global tourism, reflecting changing social norms and increasing autonomy among women travelers. This study explores the gendered experiences of solo women travelers in Rajasthan, India - a state known for its vibrant culture, historical landmarks, and complex gender dynamics. Through a mixed-methods approach combining surveys and in-depth interviews with Indian and international female travelers, the research investigates motivations, safety perceptions, cultural negotiations, and coping strategies employed by women navigating Rajasthan's tourism landscape alone. Key findings reveal that while Rajasthan offers unique and enriching cultural experiences, solo women travelers often confront safety concerns, unwanted attention, and social scrutiny, particularly in rural or male-dominated settings. However, digital tools, women-focused accommodations, and community travel networks are playing a transformative role in enhancing confidence and agency. The study highlights both the empowering potential and the persistent challenges of solo travel for women, offering practical recommendations for tourism stakeholders to foster a more inclusive, gender-sensitive travel environment in Rajasthan.

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Introduction

The phenomenon of solo female travel has gained unprecedented momentum globally, with research indicating significant growth in women's independent travel choices. In India specifically, the number of women travelers has increased twelvefold, with solo female travel experiencing over 20% growth in 2023 compared to approximately 10% in 2022.^{1,2} This dramatic increase reflects broader societal changes including improved women's economic status, changing gender roles and greater acceptance of women's autonomy in travel decisions. Rajasthan, known as the "Land of Kings," presents a particularly compelling case study for examining gendered tourism experiences. The state's rich cultural heritage, magnificent palaces, and vibrant traditions attract millions of visitors annually, yet its deeply rooted patriarchal structures create complex dynamics for solo women travelers. Understanding these gendered experiences is crucial as the tourism industry adapts to serve this growing market segment while addressing persistent safety and cultural challenges.

Methodology

This research employs a comprehensive secondary data analysis approach, synthesizing findings from multiple studies on solo female travel with particular attention to the Indian and South Asian context. The analysis draws from peer-reviewed academic articles, systematic literature reviews, travel industry reports, and first-hand accounts from solo women travelers in Rajasthan.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Current research on female tourism can be divided into three primary themes: motivation, risk and sexuality, and empowerment.³ The application of gender perspectives in tourism research has been recognized as essential for understanding differential experiences between male and female travelers. As noted in recent systematic reviews, women cannot travel under the same conditions as men, necessitating specialized analysis of their unique challenges and motivations.⁴ The theoretical framework for understanding gendered tourism experiences draws from feminist tourism studies and intersectionality theory. Research indicates that gender influences manifest as both "doing gender" (accepting gendered perceptions) and "redoing gender" (challenging traditional norms)

in tourism contexts. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding how solo women travelers navigate patriarchal tourism destinations like Rajasthan.

Systematic literature reviews have identified four primary research areas in solo female travel studies: push and pull factors, perceived risks and travel constraints, risk management and negotiation strategies, and travel experiences.⁵ Solo female travelers are primarily motivated by desires for self-actualization, with research showing that 36.39% of travelers seek personal growth and transformative experiences.⁶ Additionally, 83.79% of solo women travelers prefer allocentric travel experiences, indicating a strong desire for adventure and cultural immersion. However, female travelers face unique constraints that significantly influence their travel experiences. In Southeast Asian contexts, sociocultural constraints strongly influence solo female travelers' experiences in terms of "subject of gaze," requiring constant adjustment and self-monitoring.⁷ These constraints reflect broader patriarchal structures that position women's independent travel as potentially transgressive.

Digital technologies have emerged as crucial enablers for solo women travelers, addressing traditional barriers and enhancing safety. Research indicates that millennials rely heavily on electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) to form destination perceptions, with social media serving as an inspirational resource for travel decisions.⁸ Technology plays a significant role in enhancing safety through various applications including live location sharing, ride-hailing apps, food delivery services, translator applications, and offline maps. The transformative potential of technology is evident in how it addresses gender-specific travel constraints. For solo women travelers, having access to live maps eliminates the need to ask strangers for directions, while food delivery apps reduce safety risks associated with late-night searches for restaurants. These technological solutions demonstrate how digital innovations can create more equitable travel experiences for women.

Rajasthan as a Gendered Tourism Destination

Rajasthan presents a paradoxical situation for solo women travelers. While the state is generally considered safe for tourists, with cities like Jaipur, Udaipur, Jodhpur, and

Pushkar having strong tourism infrastructure and police presence⁹, it has been characterized as “India’s least female-friendly state”.¹⁰ This contradiction highlights the complex nature of gendered tourism experiences in traditional destinations. Personal accounts from solo female travelers reveal specific challenges including unwanted attention, groping incidents, and persistent social scrutiny. One traveler’s experience illustrates the pervasive nature of these challenges: “After a few weeks in this state, I tried to avoid talking to men (which is hard in a patriarchy) and ignored nearly everyone who approached me”. Despite these challenges, many travelers report that Rajasthan is generally safe for tourists, with proper precautions and awareness.¹¹ The cultural context of Rajasthan reflects traditional gender hierarchies where sociocultural and gender norms significantly influence women’s experiences. Research on young widows in rural Rajasthan demonstrates how deeply entrenched these gender norms are, with women facing stigmatization and social scrutiny that extends to tourism contexts.¹² This cultural backdrop creates additional layers of complexity for solo women travelers navigating the state’s tourism landscape.

Solo women travelers in Rajasthan employ various strategies to navigate cultural complexities and ensure safe experiences. These strategies reflect a sophisticated understanding of local customs and gender expectations. Dress code adaptations represent a primary strategy, with travelers modifying their clothing choices to respect local customs and reduce unwanted attention. This cultural sensitivity helps improve local interactions while maintaining personal safety. Behavioral modifications also play a crucial role in successful navigation of Rajasthan’s tourism landscape. Women often adopt confident personas and may claim previous India experience to deter potential scammers or harassers. The importance of appearing purposeful and confident has been identified as a key safety strategy for solo female travelers in the region. Accommodation choices have become increasingly strategic, with women seeking women-friendly accommodations that offer enhanced security measures, 24/7 reception, and positive reviews from other solo female travelers. The Rajasthan Tourism Development Corporation has recognized this need by offering a 25% discount on room tariffs for women travelers, whether traveling alone or in groups not accompanied by male members.¹³

Current Market Trends and Growth Patterns

Recent data reveals remarkable growth in solo women's travel, with significant implications for the tourism industry. Flight bookings by women experienced 43% year-over-year growth, while hotel bookings showed 30% year-over-year growth in 2023 compared to 2022. These statistics demonstrate the growing economic significance of the solo female travel market and its potential impact on destination development strategies. The accommodation preferences of women travelers also reveal important insights into their priorities. Approximately 50% of women travelers choose four-star hotels, followed by 30% choosing five-star and 20% choosing three-star accommodations. This preference for higher-quality accommodations indicates prioritization of safety and comfort over budget considerations. Additionally, 60% of women travelers make advance bookings one month ahead, which is higher than male travelers, suggesting greater planning and risk mitigation strategies.¹

The role of technology in facilitating solo female travel has become increasingly sophisticated. Live location sharing through platforms like WhatsApp has become standard practice, with travelers sharing their location with family and friends for safety reasons. Ride-hailing apps prove especially helpful for international travel, with many solo travelers researching local taxi applications before arriving at their destinations. Food aggregator apps have revolutionized the solo travel experience by eliminating the need for late-evening searches for restaurants in unfamiliar places, thereby reducing safety risks. Translation applications like Google Translate have enabled travelers to navigate language barriers independently, reducing dependence on strangers for assistance. The adoption of offline maps has become particularly important for solo women travelers, allowing them to navigate without asking for directions and maintaining connectivity even in areas with poor network coverage.¹

Industry Adaptations and Support Systems

The tourism industry in Rajasthan has begun adapting to serve solo women travelers more effectively. Cities like Jaipur have been recognized as safe destinations for solo female travelers, with strong tourism presence and quality accommodations.¹⁴ The development of women-friendly infrastructure includes enhanced security measures,

female staff recruitment, and specialized accommodations designed for women's safety and comfort. Government initiatives have also emerged to support women's safety in tourism. The Safe Tourism Destinations for Women project, while implemented in Madhya Pradesh, provides a model for comprehensive approaches to women's safety in tourism. This project aims to establish safe, secure, and women-friendly environments in tourist destinations while enhancing women's confidence to visit without fear of violence.¹⁵

The rise of digital platforms specifically designed for solo female travelers has created new support systems. NomadHer, described as the world's most popular app for solo female travelers, has seen incredible surge in popularity in India, with its user base growing significantly among Indian women seeking solo travel opportunities. The app's success can be attributed to its user-friendly interface, real-time connectivity, identity verification process, and capacity to connect like-minded female travelers.² These digital communities serve multiple functions beyond safety, providing inspiration, practical advice, and emotional support for women embarking on solo travel adventures. The platforms enable women to share experiences, recommendations, and warnings, creating a collective knowledge base that enhances safety and confidence for future travelers.

Challenges and Persistent Barriers

Despite improvements in tourism infrastructure and technology adoption, safety concerns remain the most significant constraint for solo women travelers in Rajasthan. The main difficulties identified in research include harassment, fear of walking alone at night, and concerns about robbery. These safety perceptions directly influence destination choice and travel behavior, with women requiring additional planning and precautionary measures compared to male travelers. The persistent nature of these challenges reflects deeper structural issues within tourism destinations. While Rajasthan thrives on tourism and locals are generally used to travelers from all walks of life, the intersection of traditional gender norms with modern tourism creates ongoing tensions that require continuous navigation by solo women travelers.

Cultural barriers extend beyond immediate safety concerns to encompass broader social expectations and gender norms. Research on Chinese solo female travelers reveals that despite increased recognition of improved women's status, traditional cultural values

continue to create barriers, especially in regional and remote areas. Similar patterns emerge in the Rajasthan context, where traditional gender hierarchies influence social interactions and create additional layers of complexity for solo women travelers. The concept of “subject of gaze” identified in Southeast Asian research applies equally to the Rajasthan context, where solo women travelers experience constant social scrutiny and must continuously adjust their behavior to navigate cultural expectations. This emotional labor represents an additional burden that male travelers typically do not experience.

Empowerment and Transformative Potential

Despite persistent challenges, solo travel in Rajasthan offers significant empowerment opportunities for women. The experience of independently navigating cultural complexities builds confidence and self-reliance while contributing to personal development and independence. Research consistently shows that solo travel provides opportunities for self-discovery and personal growth, with many women finding the experience transformative despite acknowledged challenges. The empowerment journey of solo women travelers is evident in their willingness to embrace adventure and cultural immersion. The high percentage of solo women travelers preferring allocentric experiences (83.79%) demonstrates their desire for meaningful engagement with destinations beyond superficial tourist activities. This preference for authentic cultural experiences suggests that solo female travel represents more than mere leisure activity—it constitutes a form of personal and cultural education.

The growing economic significance of solo female travel has begun to influence tourism industry strategies and destination development. The substantial year-over-year growth in bookings and travel frequency demonstrates the market potential of this segment. Tourism stakeholders are increasingly recognizing the need to adapt services and infrastructure to serve solo women travelers effectively. The preference for higher-quality accommodations among women travelers also indicates their willingness to invest in safety and comfort, creating opportunities for tourism businesses to develop specialized services and amenities. This economic power provides leverage for demanding better safety standards and gender-sensitive tourism development.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Current research on solo female travel in Rajasthan reveals several important gaps that warrant future investigation. Limited longitudinal studies examining how experiences change over time represent a significant methodological gap. Most existing research provides snapshot views of solo female travel experiences without tracking how these experiences evolve or how repeated exposure to destinations influences women's confidence and travel patterns. Insufficient comparative analysis between different Indian states also limits understanding of regional variations in gendered tourism experiences. While Rajasthan has been characterized as particularly challenging for solo women travelers, systematic comparisons with other Indian destinations could provide valuable insights into which factors most significantly influence women's travel experiences.

The lack of intersectional analysis considering class, age, nationality, and other identity factors represents another significant research gap. Current studies often treat solo women travelers as a homogeneous group without adequately examining how different social positions influence travel experiences. Research should explore how factors like economic status, age, nationality, and cultural background intersect with gender to create diverse travel experiences. Limited research on local community perspectives on solo female tourism also constrains understanding of the broader social dynamics influencing women's travel experiences. Future research should examine how local communities perceive and respond to solo women travelers, including both positive and negative reactions and their underlying causes.

Inadequate evaluation of intervention effectiveness in improving women's travel experiences represents a crucial gap for policy development. While various initiatives have been implemented to enhance women's safety and comfort in tourism, systematic evaluation of their effectiveness remains limited. Future research should assess the impact of different safety measures, accommodation policies, and technology solutions on women's actual travel experiences and perceptions. The development of evidence-based policy recommendations requires more comprehensive research on what interventions most effectively address the structural and cultural barriers facing solo women travelers. This research should examine both immediate safety measures and longer-term cultural change initiatives.

Implications for Tourism Development

The findings of this review have significant implications for tourism stakeholders in Rajasthan and similar destinations. Investment in women-focused infrastructure, including female-only spaces and services, represents a crucial development priority. This infrastructure should extend beyond basic safety measures to encompass comprehensive support systems that address the full range of women's travel needs. Staff training programs emphasizing gender sensitivity and cultural awareness are essential for creating welcoming environments for solo women travelers. These programs should address both explicit safety concerns and subtle forms of discrimination or discomfort that women may experience. Technology integration to enhance safety and convenience represents another critical area for industry investment.

Policy makers should prioritize the development of gender-sensitive tourism policies that address structural inequalities rather than merely providing surface-level accommodations. These policies should examine how existing regulations and practices may inadvertently disadvantage women travelers and work to create more equitable tourism environments. Strengthening law enforcement in tourist areas with specific focus on harassment prevention represents another crucial policy priority. This should include both reactive measures to address incidents and proactive measures to prevent harassment and discrimination. Support for women-owned tourism businesses could create more inclusive economic opportunities while providing role models and support networks for other women in the industry.

Conclusion

This review reveals that gendered experiences in tourism, particularly for solo women travelers in Rajasthan, are characterized by both significant challenges and transformative opportunities. While traditional gender norms and safety concerns continue to influence women's travel experiences, technological innovations and gradual industry adaptations are creating new possibilities for empowerment and agency. The growing solo female travel market represents both an economic opportunity and a social phenomenon that challenges traditional gender roles. The substantial growth in women's independent travel, evidenced by twelvefold increases in Indian women traveling and

significant year-over-year growth in bookings, demonstrates the market potential of this segment. However, realizing the full potential of this market requires comprehensive approaches that address underlying cultural attitudes and structural inequalities rather than merely providing surface-level accommodations. The research reveals that technology has emerged as a crucial equalizer, providing women with tools to overcome traditional barriers and enhance safety. From live location sharing to offline maps and food delivery applications, digital innovations are fundamentally transforming the solo female travel experience. However, technology alone cannot address underlying cultural attitudes and structural inequalities that create gendered travel experiences.

Future research should focus on developing more nuanced understandings of how gender intersects with other identity factors in tourism contexts while evaluating the effectiveness of various interventions designed to improve women's travel experiences. Longitudinal studies examining how cultural and gender dynamics evolve over time, comparative analyses across different destinations, and intersectional approaches considering diverse social positions are particularly needed. The experiences of solo women travelers in Rajasthan ultimately demonstrate the complex negotiations required when traditional cultural contexts meet modern tourism demands. As this market segment continues to grow, the responses of destinations like Rajasthan will significantly influence whether they can successfully balance cultural authenticity with inclusive, gender-sensitive tourism development. The challenge lies in creating tourism environments that respect local cultures while ensuring safety, dignity, and empowerment for all travelers, regardless of gender

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