

Understanding the Challenges Muslim Women Face in Adventure Tourism

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges faced by Muslim women in adventure tourism, aiming to uncover social, cultural, and logistical barriers that limit their participation. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine Muslim women who actively engage in adventure activities. The findings reveal that participants face several obstacles, including family-related safety concerns, discrimination, harassment, and a lack of appropriate infrastructure and privacy. Despite these challenges, the women expressed a strong desire to continue participating in such activities, highlighting the need for tourism providers to adopt gender-sensitive and culturally respectful practices. While the study is limited by its small sample size of nine and specific cultural context, it offers important insights for future research and industry practices. Practical implications include the development of inclusive services such as female-only groups, private facilities, and culturally aware staff training. This research adds original value by shedding light on an underrepresented group in tourism literature and offers actionable recommendations to enhance the travel experiences of Muslim women.

Keywords: Adventure Tourism; Muslim Women; Muslim Friendly Tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

The global Muslim population is expanding rapidly, projected to reach 2.3 billion by 2030, accounting for 27% of the world's population (Bahardeen et al., 2023). Within this demographic, Muslim women are emerging as a significant segment of travellers. The Mastercard-Crescent Rating Muslim Women in Travel (MWIT) 2019 report revealed that approximately 63 million Muslim women travelled in 2018, making up 45% of all Muslim travellers (Bahardeen et al., 2023). This shift reflects changing societal norms and evolving gender roles in various cultural contexts.

Historically, Muslim women's travel has been constrained by religious and cultural beliefs. However, classical Islamic scholarship, such as Ibn Hazm's *al-Ihkam*, presents nuanced discussions on women's right to travel. Based on verses 3:97 and 2:196 of the Qur'an, Ibn Hazm argues that women can perform Hajj without a mahram, referencing the Prophet's hadith: "Do not prevent the female servants of Allah from coming to Allah's mosques." This supports the broader notion that women can travel independently for religious and personal development purposes (Baykal, 2023; Haddad, 2019). Despite such interpretations, in some Middle Eastern countries, cultural perceptions still impose restrictions on women's mobility (Slak & Almuhrzi, 2021). Interestingly, these ideologies are increasingly challenged by movements led by Malay Muslim women (MMW), who advocate for their right to travel.

Post COVID-19, adventure tourism has grown rapidly as people seek meaningful, nature-based, and physically engaging experiences (Janowski et al., 2021). Outdoor activities have become a preferred way to maintain well-being while avoiding crowded, enclosed spaces. A report by the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) and Switzerland Tourism highlights women's roles in adventure travel as employees, travellers, and community members, and promotes empowering women through leadership, flexible work policies, and travel products designed for women (Kelly, 2022). Tourism providers are increasingly hiring female guides, offering women-only trips, and tailoring services to suit women's preferences. Closing gender gaps requires moving beyond stereotypes and diversifying women's representation in the industry, especially in leadership roles where women can influence inclusive decision-making (Kelly, 2022).

Within this context, Muslim-friendly adventure tourism has emerged as a specialised niche. It caters to Muslim travellers seeking thrilling yet halal-compliant experiences. This includes respecting religious practices such as modesty, dietary laws, and prayer times, while offering comfortable and culturally appropriate services (Ahmed, 2023). The rise of this niche reflects the growing demand for adventure tourism that aligns with Islamic principles. However, despite the overall rise in research on Muslim travellers, gender-specific experiences, particularly those of Muslim women in adventure tourism, remain underexplored.

While adventure tourism is becoming increasingly popular among women, including Muslim women, significant barriers remain. Muslim women today are more empowered and view travel as a form of self-fulfillment and an escape from daily responsibilities. Yet, they often face challenges related to safety, religious identity, and cultural acceptance. Islamophobia further compounds these concerns, making safety a critical factor in their travel decisions (Ratthinan & Selamat, 2019).

Religious and cultural constraints also impact their participation. For instance, adherence to Sharia law and principles like amar ma'ruf nahi munkar necessitate modest behaviour and dress, often limiting options for recreational activities. A lack of women-only spaces, modest clothing for active tourism, and inclusive facilities contributes to a significant gap between interest and actual participation among Muslim women (Rehman, 2022).

Privacy and comfort are highly valued by Muslim women, especially in recreational settings. Yet, tourism services often fail to provide gender-segregated spaces or female-focused activities. A critical issue is the availability of female tour guides or instructors, which directly affects Muslim women's comfort and willingness to engage in activities. While some services offer women-only trips, they often overlook the need for same-gender staff, which is vital for creating a respectful and supportive environment (Malloy, 2024).

In addition to infrastructure gaps, societal perceptions and misinterpretations of Islamic texts further restrict Muslim women's mobility. While correct interpretations protect their travel rights, many women continue to encounter societal expectations that confine them to domestic roles. Concerns about community approval, religious obligations, and safety make the decision to travel complex. Ratthinan and Selamat (2019) argue that these social pressures can create internal conflict and anxiety, even among women aware of their Islamic rights.

Other limiting factors include financial constraints, time limitations, and a lack of awareness about travel opportunities. In some regions, gender inequality in education restricts women's exposure to tourism and travel literacy. In societies where women receive limited education, they may lack the knowledge and confidence to travel independently or participate in adventure tourism (Zadeh, 2024). In others, traditional views on gender roles discourage women from prioritising leisure or solo travel.

Despite increasing interest among Muslim women in adventure tourism, they continue to face religious, social, structural, and perceptual barriers. These obstacles highlight the urgent need for more inclusive tourism practices that address gender specific concerns. Tourism providers and policymakers must collaborate to create safer, more respectful, and culturally appropriate travel opportunities for Muslim women. Accordingly, the primary objective of this study is to investigate the challenges Muslim

women face in adventure tourism, with particular emphasis on identifying the social, cultural, and logistical barriers that restrict their participation

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Both Muslim women travellers and women travellers in general encountered various constraints that significantly shape their travel experiences. While the nature of these constraints may vary due to cultural or religious considerations, the challenges faced by these two groups often overlap. The integration of findings from Tavakoli and Mura (2021), Abdul Shukor and Kattiyapornpong (2024), and Doran (2016) showed several factors that become barriers or constraints for Muslim women to join or enjoy adventure activities. One of them is the socio-cultural factors, such as traditional gender roles and societal expectations. This factor often limits their independence in making travel decisions, with some cultures or religions requiring male guardian approval. Upon returning from trips, women may also face cultural scrutiny or judgment, particularly if their travel choices deviate from societal norms. Religious restrictions further constrain their options, as adherence to Islamic principles necessitates access to halal food, prayer facilities, and accommodations that respect modesty and other faith-based requirements.

Destinations that lack these aspects present significant barriers to participation in adventure travel. Band (2024) mentioned that safety concerns are another critical constraint, as fears of harassment and limited availability of women-only facilities or secure accommodations discourage independent travel. Practical limitations, including financial constraints and the challenge of accessing reliable information about Muslim-friendly services, further complicate travel planning. Additionally, internal psychological barriers, such as feelings of guilt or hesitation due to familial and cultural expectations, often deter Muslim women from pursuing travel opportunities (Tavakoli & Mura, 2021; Abdul Shukor & Kattiyapornpong, 2024; Doran, 2016).

A study from Brugulat and Coromina (2021) titled “Constraints of Solo Female Backpackers in Southeast Asia” identified several constraints faced by women during their adventure travels. While this research primarily focuses on women in general, the constraints discussed were also relevant to Muslim women travellers who experience similar challenges in adventure tourism. These constraints can be grouped into four categories, which are sociocultural, personal, practical, and spatial constraints. Sociocultural constraints are rooted in societal expectations and cultural norms that could limit women’s freedom and make them more vulnerable to harassment and discrimination. For example, in some cultures, women traveling alone might be frowned upon or seen as inappropriate, which can lead to judgmental attitudes or even bitterness from local communities. Personal constraint refers to individual beliefs, fears, and self-efficacy. These include concerns like fear of getting lost, facing violence, or being unable

to cope with unexpected situations. Such fears can significantly impact a woman's confidence and willingness to engage in adventure activities, especially when travelling solo. Practical constraints involve issues related to travel logistics, such as transportation, affordable yet secure accommodations, or managing travel budgets.

These practical concerns are often more pronounced for women, as they may need to take extra precautions to ensure their safety. Spatial constraints are related to the physical and geographical aspects of travel. Certain areas may be less accessible or safe for solo female travellers due to factors like difficult terrain, poor infrastructure, or high crime rates. Women may need to carefully plan their routes and destinations to avoid potentially dangerous locations (Brugulat & Coromina, 2021). Additionally, Haddad (2019) and Gewinner (2021), both examine the influence of cultural backgrounds on the travel behaviour of Muslim women. Gewinner (2021) highlights how societal expectations and cultural norms often restrict Muslim women's freedom, exposing them to judgment and discrimination. Similarly, Haddad (2019) emphasises the significant role that sociocultural and religious factors play in shaping their travel experiences. Both studies underscore the need to overcome these constraints to encourage greater participation of Muslim women in tourism activities. They also highlight the importance of addressing stereotypes to enhance their overall travel experiences (Hadad, 2019; Gewinner, 2021). In summary, this research highlights the various constraints faced by women in adventure tourism, which are equally important to Muslim women travellers. Understanding these constraints can help in developing targeted strategies to support and empower all women who wish to embark on adventurous journeys.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a phenomenological qualitative research design to gain a deep understanding of Muslim women's needs and challenges in adventure tourism. Phenomenology is well-suited for exploring lived experiences and individual perceptions (Delve et al., 2022). A qualitative approach allows for flexibility and depth, capturing the personal and contextual dimensions of participants' experiences. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method, as they encourage open dialogue and rich insights that structured surveys might miss. Research questions and study objectives were developed based on a thorough literature review and served as a guide in designing the interview protocol. Themes such as access, communication, services, environment, and social perceptions were explored to align with the study's aim.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique aimed at selecting information-rich cases that provide an in-depth understanding relevant to the research question. The sample targeted Muslim women who had actively participated in adventure tourism, with inclusion criteria including age

above 18, self-identification as Muslim, and experience in at least one adventure tourism activity within the past two years to ensure relevance and recency of experiences. A sample size of 5 to 10 was determined based on the principle of data saturation, where additional interviews no longer yield new insights (Rahimi et al., 2024). Literature suggests that 5–10 interviews are sufficient in studies with homogenous populations to achieve thematic saturation (Malterud et al., 2016; Hennink & Kaiser, 2020). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood the study's objectives and ethical considerations, such as confidentiality and voluntary participation. The interviews, guided by open-ended questions adapted from Bahardeen et al. (2023), Tavakoli and Mura (2021), Abdul Shukor and Kattiyapornpong (2024), and Doran (2016), were recorded, transcribed, and analysed. A pre-test involving one academic and one experienced adventurer confirmed the relevance and clarity of the interview questions.

Data from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, which complements the phenomenological approach by systematically identifying patterns and themes within participants' lived experiences, enabling the researcher to interpret and describe the essence of those experiences. This approach involves six stages: familiarization with data, initial coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming them, and writing up the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crosly, 2021). The researcher engaged in reflective practices and bracketing to reduce personal bias, ensuring the participants' perspectives remained central. Themes were identified across domains such as travel access, modesty-related services, communication, safety, environmental compatibility, and societal pressures. This structured analysis allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the unique challenges faced by Muslim women in adventure tourism.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A total of nine respondents participated in the study, and all of them shared several common characteristics are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Specifically, the respondents were Muslim women in the age range of 20 to 23 years old who wore the hijab and observed their daily prayer. The respondents showed varying levels of adventure experience. The majority were categorized as having intermediate-level experience, while three respondents were identified as having advanced-level experience. Furthermore, all respondents had participated in adventure activities within Malaysia, while only one respondent had engaged in international adventure activities, specifically in Japan. Below is the table of respondents' demographic profile and the indicators for the code used by the author for each respondent:

Table 1. The indicator of the code used for the respondents

| Aspect | Codes |
|----------------------------|--|
| Gender | F (females) M (males) |
| Adventure Experience Level | Beginner (B) – New to adventure tourism Intermediate (I) – Moderate experience Advanced (A) – Highly experienced |
| Location/ Context | Domestic tourist (D) – Participates locally International tourist (I) – Participate abroad |

Table 2. The demographic of the respondents

| Code | Gender | Age | Experience Level | Location |
|---------|--------|-----|------------------|---------------|
| F-A-D-1 | Female | 22 | Advanced | Domestic |
| F-I-D-2 | Female | 20 | Intermediate | Domestic |
| F-I-D-3 | Female | 21 | Intermediate | Domestic |
| F-I-D-4 | Female | 22 | Intermediate | Domestic |
| F-I-D-5 | Female | 23 | Intermediate | Domestic |
| F-A-D-6 | Female | 22 | Advanced | Domestic |
| F-I-D-7 | Female | 21 | Intermediate | Domestic |
| F-A-I-8 | Female | 22 | Advanced | International |
| F-I-D-9 | Female | 22 | Intermediate | Domestic |

Despite the growing enthusiasm of Muslim women for adventure tourism, they continue to face several significant challenges that hinder their participation. One major barrier is family concerns about safety, especially for solo travellers or those in all-female

groups. As Respondent F-I-D-2 noted, "My family worries about safety, especially for solo or all-female group travel" (see Table 3, Theme CW1). This aligns with findings from Ratthinan and Selamat (2019), who highlight safety concerns as a primary factor limiting Muslim women's travel autonomy. Discrimination and Islamophobia also pose significant obstacles. Respondent F-A-I-8 shared, "I experienced Islamophobia abroad when the operator was racist toward me" (Table 3, Theme CW2), echoing the experiences documented by Tavakoli and Mura (2021), who report that Islamophobic attitudes in tourism settings negatively impact Muslim women travellers' comfort and willingness to participate. Overcoming stereotypes about Muslim women in adventure tourism remains a persistent challenge. Respondent F-A-D-6 explained, "If I am being judged, that is the challenge I need to go through to enjoy what I love" (Table 3, Theme CW3), which resonates with Ahmed's (2023) discussion on the societal expectations and prejudices Muslim women must navigate in leisure spaces. Logistical barriers, such as connectivity challenges, also impact their experience. For instance, Respondent F-A-D-1 remarked, "When we reached the deeper part of that area, we had difficulties accessing the GPS because of weak connectivity. We got lost for a bit" (Table 3, Theme AC2). Such infrastructural limitations have been noted as common obstacles in remote adventure tourism destinations (Janowski et al., 2021).

Harassment, particularly catcalling, adds another layer of discomfort and safety concern. Respondent F-A-I-8 reported, "I experienced catcalling and felt unsafe and uncomfortable" (Table 3, Theme SS2), consistent with Kelly's (2022) findings on gendered harassment in outdoor and adventure settings. Mixed-gender environments also create discomfort, particularly during activities requiring physical proximity. Respondent F-A-D-1 shared, "During parasailing, the seating was mixed with men, and I was uncomfortable sitting beside a man in my wet shirt" (Table 3, Theme RC4). This supports previous research highlighting the importance of gender-sensitive arrangements in adventure tourism (Ramli, 2023). Privacy concerns in changing areas further complicate participation. As Respondent F-I-D-6 remarked, "Changing areas are often lacking, which makes me uncomfortable" (Table 3, Theme SA2), echoing Tavakoli and Mura's (2021) emphasis on the need for gender-segregated facilities. Finally, logistical issues such as difficulties with vehicle rentals can disrupt travel plans and cause stress. Respondent F-I-D-9 recounted, "I have experienced difficulties when renting a vehicle; my friend was scammed by the owner, which affected our schedule" (Table 3, Theme AC4). Such challenges highlight the broader infrastructural gaps affecting Muslim women's adventure travel (Ramli, 2023).

Overall, these findings reveal the multifaceted challenges Muslim women face in adventure tourism, spanning social, cultural, and logistical domains. Addressing these

barriers is crucial for tourism providers aiming to create safer, more inclusive, and culturally respectful environments that support Muslim women's participation.

Table 3. Table of thematic analysis for the challenges as Muslim women themes in adventure tourism

| Category | Theme Code | Theme Description | Illustrative example |
|---------------------------------|------------|------------------------------|--|
| CW (Challenges as Muslim Women) | CW1 | Family concerns about safety | <i>"My family worries about safety, especially for solo or all-female group travel"</i> |
| | CW2 | Islamophobia/ discrimination | <i>"I experienced Islamophobia abroad when the operator was racist toward me"</i> |
| | CW3 | Overcoming stereotypes | <i>"If I am being judged, that is the challenge I need to go through to enjoy what I love"</i> |
| | AC2 | Connectivity challenges | <i>"When we reached the deeper part of that area, we had difficulties accessing the GPS because of weak connectivity. We got lost for a bit"</i> |
| | SS2 | Harassment concerns | <i>"I experienced catcalling and felt unsafe and uncomfortable"</i> |

| | | | |
|--|-----|-----------------------------------|--|
| | RC4 | Mixed-gender environment concerns | <i>“During parasailing, the seating was mixed with men, and I was uncomfortable sitting beside a man in my wet shirt”</i> |
| | SA2 | Privacy in changing areas | <i>“Changing areas often lacking, which makes me uncomfortable”</i> |
| | AC4 | Issues with rental vehicles | <i>“I have experienced difficulties when renting a vehicle; my friend was scammed by the owner, which affected our schedule” (AC4)</i> |

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study set out to explore the unique challenges faced by Muslim women in adventure tourism, a growing segment of global travel. As the Muslim population continues to rise, Muslim women are becoming increasingly visible in the tourism landscape, especially in adventure travel. However, their participation remains shaped by a complex interplay of religious obligations, cultural norms, and structural limitations. While Islamic teachings, when correctly interpreted, allow women to travel independently, societal attitudes and misinterpretations still act as significant barriers. Findings from both the literature review and primary interviews affirm that Muslim women often face issues related to safety, modesty, discrimination, infrastructure, and social acceptance, all of which can limit their freedom to engage in adventurous travel experiences. The voices of the respondents in this study provide firsthand insight into the lived realities of Muslim women travellers. Safety concerns, especially in solo or women-only travel, emerged as a consistent theme, alongside discomfort in mixed-gender environments and a lack of privacy in facilities. Challenges such as harassment, Islamophobia, and unreliable local services further

restrict participation. Family and societal pressures also contribute to internal conflicts, forcing many Muslim women to balance personal aspirations with community expectations. Despite these obstacles, the participants demonstrated resilience, determination, and a clear desire to pursue travel experiences that align with their values.

In conclusion, there is a clear need for more inclusive, respectful, and culturally sensitive tourism practices that consider the specific needs of Muslim women. Adventure tourism providers and policymakers must take proactive steps to create safer environments, provide women-only spaces and services, and challenge stereotypes through education and representation. By doing so, the industry can not only empower Muslim women to travel more freely but also enrich the adventure tourism sector with greater diversity, inclusivity, and global relevance. However, this study is limited by its small sample size and specific cultural context, which may affect the generalizability of findings. Future research should include larger, more diverse samples and mixed methods to deepen understanding. Implementing culturally sensitive staff training, women-only facilities, and community engagement are practical recommendations to enhance Muslim women's participation and experiences in adventure tourism.

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