

Solo woman travel in Nepal: A study of Swo-Yatra

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ABSTRACT

This paper, qualitative in nature, aims to explore the experience of solo woman travellers who were selected in solo travel challenge of Swo-Yatra. For the study purpose, 15 solo female travellers among 50 have been studied in terms of diverse identities, destinations and challenges they faced during their solo trips. There are several difficulties within the gender stereotypes in the Nepalese social structure. Women have not stopped travelling solo; rather, more solo women travellers are participating in the challenge. Despite various limitations, the fragments of their experiences are worthwhile to initiate the narratives of self-discovery and inner freedom of women in Nepal.

1. Introduction

Solo traveller travels on a fully inclusive package, not in a group (Chai, 1996). Solo travel in women is trending now. They travel without the companionship of any other. Travelling has a long history but travelling alone was not encouraged for women. Many women in history, starting in the 18th century and onwards women are travelling alone. Many have proved that gender disparity could no longer stop them from travelling and have shown how travelling has improved their lives. The concept of solo travelling is believed in Egera. She was a lady, broadly regarded as the creator of a point-by-point record of a journey to the Holy Land. Since then, women travellers have been travelling. According to Jordan and Gibson (2005) dearth of restrictions during the life stage of a woman may be a reason for travelling. The concern of safety and security are negative social obstacles on travel for women solo travellers and once they conquer this feeling, it becomes a reward for the journey. Compared to the past, women have started making their journey more socially and culturally visible, which has increased the number of solo women travellers worldwide (Henderson, 1991).

In Nepal, people hardly travel for the sake of learning and exploring the inner self. Moreover, travel still seems less accessible to women. The more vulnerable women groups have even lesser access to mobility compare to men. Travelling solo was a challenge and it is still a challenge for Nepalese women. *Swo-Yatra*, a solo women travel challenge being organized annually by NepaliTravellers since 2015, is one initiative to actualize solo woman trips in Nepal. It connects travellers' communities and collaborates with the activism and academics of the travel world. Travel is not only the means of mobility. It is also a means of self-discovery. Moreover, travelling solo is more meaningful to actualize one's self.

Travel and gender are one of the current issues in the travel world and Nepali women are being trained to solo trips, too. Conversations from gender and travel angles have been initiated from formal and informal platforms. Researches show that travelling for women is a schema with multiple choices, where each choice explains the power to decide where to go and where not to go. Moreover, traveling alone is an astonishing and exciting act for women; female travel alone is increasing day by day. Travel behavior trends by gender showing that it could slowly close the gap between men and women. When more women enter into the public sphere and keep on solo travel by achieving higher education and advancing in their lives, the gap between men and women could be blurred more practically. There are gender differences in mobility; it is believed that women travel

shorter distances than men (Law, 1999). Nevertheless, traveling alone is not sanctioned by middle and upper-class society. The pervasive historical sentiment was that respectable women should not engage in extensive travel, especially not by themselves (Jordan & Gibson, 1996). There appears a gender difference even in walking for leisure. Women have always been looked at as the 'Other' by putting them under the category of the second sex. Due to the inequality that has existed between men and women, women have lagged behind in different spheres of life. With their increased economic independence and education, women now have greater opportunities to, and choices about, travel. However, individual influence can reveal preferences and attitudes towards travelling. Since women tend to have specific travel characteristics in terms of mode of choice, travel time, trip purpose, and travel distance, they have very different preferences and constraints than men (Ng & Acker, 2018). With the advent of time, women are also travelling and they are making things like solo travel happen possible.

According to Wilson and Little (2005), tourists, in general, are moved towards the search for an experience that provides escape, freedom and pleasure. Bond (1997) also states that the relationship between travel and experience is the key point of why women choose to travel alone. Solo women travelers seek adventure, social interaction, education and self-understanding. A survey by TripAdvisor reveals that 91 percent of women in Germany and France and 81 percent of women in Australia are interested in travelling alone (ETB Travel News, 2015). This trend is also evident in Southeast Asia, with 79 percent of women planning to travel alone and in 2015, 48 percent of Southeast Asian women had actually taken a solo holiday, an increase from 36 percent in 2014 (Elliot, 2015).

Talking about Nepal and Nepali women, the only place where they could function was their homes and, in their homes, too, they are highly suppressed, having been confined to narrow domestic chores only. In response to the dearth of research in this area, this study investigates the solo travel behavior of Nepali women and, specifically, the opportunity and challenges of solo female travelers. Solo women travel is often divided into many segments like for pleasure, business, visiting friends/relatives and self-recognition, empowerment/autonomy, etc., but this study focuses more on the segment of their self-discovery. It tries to explore how Nepali women perceive and negotiate the risk while travelling alone. It further attempts to study their resistance to tackle the risks and the underlying power relations that will lead to their self-discovery. Since solo woman travel in Nepal is in its nascent stage where it has not reached to the mass, the significance of this study lies in making solo woman travel reach to various women in mass irrespective of their age, economic, social, cultural or regional differences. To meet the objective, this study has used qualitative research method based on 15 representative solo women travellers out of 50 women who travelled solo successfully; these women travellers and their accounts were selected in terms of diverse identities, destinations and challenges they faced during their solo trips.

2. Solo Women Travel Challenge (Swo-Yata)

Swo-Yatra, a solo women travel challenge being organized annually via NepaliTravellers was initiated in 2015 by Pemba Sherpa and Jason Shah with the title "Why I Travel?" Being travelers themselves and traveling solo inside and outside Nepal, they wanted to introduce solo women travel in Nepal as people did not travel much and wanted to bring the trend of solo travel in the country. The challenge's main aim was to empower women through solo travel and help gender equality (Sherpa & Shah 2021). As Dorjee Khando writes, they came up with an idea of initiating the challenge to encourage Nepali women to travel solo with an aim of helping women empower and self-dependent. The selected women for solo trip began to facilitate for the newer generation of solo woman travellers (Timilsina 2021). Till 2020 more than 1800 women applied for solo trip with travel plan (Sherpa & Shah 2021). In 2015 Sagarika Bhatta solo traveled Khaptad Area. In that year, Priyanka Shrestha traveled solo to South India, when the decision was made within 24 hours. Shrestha recalling the moment of her solo plan and decision making says,

The trip actually happened on a whim. We were chatting on an evening, I blurted that I'd always wanted to go to South India. To which Pemba dai said, 'So why don't you go?' When I replied it was because I don't have the money, he proposed that he would give me the money needed and challenged me to leave for India in the next 24 hours. I said yes, and he handed me the money the very next day and I decided to take on the challenge (Bajracharya 2018).

In the year 2016, there were more applicants and eight participants were selected and sent for solo trips with the brand Solo Women Travel Challenge. The number increased in the following year and 18 participants were sent for their solo trips in 2017. Since 2018, Solo Expedition was introduced by opening for both gender and they had to travel for a minimum of 60 days (Khado 2018). They could travel a maximum of up to six months (Sherpa 2021). There were around 100 applicants and a female solo traveller Shanti Rai was selected to travel for 78 days almost all over Nepal. That year, NepaliTravellers had planned to expand their challenge up to Southeast Asia and two participants would be selected to travel solo for a month. They planned three programs in 2018 namely *Swo-Yatra* Nepal chapter, *Swo-Yatra* Southeast Asia chapter and Solo expedition (Open).

Still a woman's mobility is closely restricted in Nepalese society as a means to control her sexuality and maintain her subordinate position. According to Tamang (2021), if we look at Nepal's culture, families are very reluctant when it comes to a girl travelling alone. Tamang, while writing in *NepalNews* brings references from some solo travelers, i.e. Pooja Rizal, who came back from a 67-day solo trip to very far-flung destinations from the Capital City, Kathmandu: Khaptad-Bajura-Rara-Jumla-Dolpa-Solu.

Tamang further quotes Ashmita Thapa, the next solo traveler, who views that solo travel as always a matter of concern to family and friends and hard to make a decision. The available data also proves it more importantly, in intersections of communities that freedom of mobility in Nepal is lowest among the Muslim women in 2018 (50.9%). Madhesi Other Caste groups and Madhesi Dalits are also among those with a relatively lower percentage of freedom of mobility. Hill Brahmins, Newars and Hill Dalits have the highest percentage of women (85 and above) who enjoy the freedom of mobility (Gurung et al., 2020). In this situation, solo women travel could be the most powerful aspect of mobility, though each woman has her own reasons to travel alone. Travel alone desires the escape of daily life, looking for diverse cultural contexts other than those she is used to (Crompton, 1979).

Solo Woman Travel Challenge campaign being held each year by a group called NepaliTravellers since 2015 has funded fifty women travellers till 2020. According to Pemba Sherpa, one of the program's initiators, Nepali women are trapped by social norms and values, which do not allow them to make bold decisions or create independent ambitions. So, this campaign was started to support the women break such traps. And that is why the program supports those strong women who are willing to go beyond social conventions and be role models. To participate in the challenge, any interested Nepali citizen born on or before August 2000, who identifies as female, can submit their online application consisting of travel itinerary and budget to a place they have never travelled before. The organizer will then select some applicants and provide them with the necessary grant and mentorship.

There are researches conducted on challenges of solo woman traveler. According to Little and Wilson (2005), women's motivations for independent travel relate to the desire to challenge themselves, find a sense of autonomy and self-determination, meet new people and/or extend themselves 'out of their comfort zone' (p. 168). So, the perks of being a solo woman traveller are many as it broadens one's mental horizon, makes one independent and empowered, boosts confidence, provides ample opportunity for self-discovery and realizations, changes one's perspective for good, helps in personality development and so on. And all these aids accentuate women's self-consciousness, which leads them towards inner freedom.

3. Actualizing the inner self

The patriarchal norms and values in Nepalese society still believe that women are the prestige of their homes. That's why it is thought that they should not cross the boundary of their homes. As Wilson & Little (2005) argue, public and tourist landscapes are constructed as 'masculinized' and built for the movement and enjoyment of men, often at the exclusion and isolation of women (p.170). Moreover, our society does not give place to individualism and this makes it difficult for someone to go against what the society thinks is right even when it is totally wrong. For instance, one of the solo travel women, Allan Rai, who had a personal desire to travel freely like a man, was aware of how society looks at such desires. Yet, she bravely took that step of travelling solo and did not blindly follow what society dictates to be true. Her personal belief stood stronger than the society's negative belief and helped her fulfill her heart's desire by travelling solo to Everest region (Gokyo valley and Renzo La pass) in 2017 when she was only twenty-one years old; she proved that women could travel sole, too.

Rai grew up in a society that prioritized culture and traditions over personal beliefs. While women are discouraged from traveling anywhere alone, and society has made them believe that they always need someone to travel with, the men in Nepalese society can travel anywhere they want, alone or with a company, without much interrogation. She expresses her travel experience, which has been quoted in the Katie Scott Aiton blog as, "Being a Nepali girl, I always wanted to have the freedom of learning and exploring anything that intrigues me. Going against the negative beliefs of society has made my trek an impressive and revolutionary act. It has proved that women are quite capable of travelling solo" (Aiton, 2018).

It was indeed a revolutionary act on Rai's part to travel solo. From her experience, we can say that travelling solo also allows women to express their personal beliefs on gender norms and it is the instances like this which provides a strong voice against rudimentary practices like gender discrimination. Her travel journey clearly proves that women can do it like men, too and thus there should not be any restrictions held against women's free mobility in the society. In her words, she enjoyed the splendour of nature: the fresh light air, the mighty mountains, the rushing rivers; everything seemed so surreal yet so realistic at the same time. She says, "I have become the person I wished to become: independent, capable, a quick decision-maker, a good speaker and a storyteller; I feel empowered. Today, people around me admire me for my courage and passion..." (Aiton, 2018).

We often live in our own bubble, failing to see the "other" too. Caught up in our own small circle, we fail to realize and embrace diversity. But travelling, be it solo or with a company definitely breaks that narrow bubble and expands one's mental horizon. Prajwola Karmacharya is a perfect example of this. Thirty-three-year-old Karmacharya, who travelled Eastern part of Nepal in 2018 for thirty-three days, had incorporated Limbu culture dominant in Eastern Nepal in her travel plan. In her words, Being from a Newari background, she felt so many things connected with Limbu culture; like they have a ritual called 'Mangena' which means worshipping our own head. Likewise, we also have 'Mah Puja' which means worshipping our own body. Most of the things, from sacrifices to everything, felt so similar to Newari culture. So, what I felt is Limbu culture is as rich as Newari culture (NepaliTravelers, 2019a, 2:22-2:52). Karmacharya's journey definitely helped to broaden her mind because she got to experience other cultures too. When one's spectrum of knowledge increases, it transforms a narrow mindscape into a broader one and with

this, the level of acceptance and inculcation for diversity also develops in the person. This in turn makes a person of not her culture only but of whole society.

Getting to decide for oneself is a ticket towards independence. Since solo travel does not facilitate the traveler to take help from other companies to take help in decision-making, all the decisions solely rest upon the individual traveller and in the case of a women solo traveller, this is empowering. It is empowering, especially in the Nepali context, in the sense that in Nepal, a woman's decision is not that much valued and trusted. They have been subjugated to act on other's decisions, i.e. mostly male. But solo woman travel enables them to make their own decisions on the journey, acting autonomously, thereby empowering them. This is what Prekchhya Shrestha, a nineteen-year-old solo traveler who travelled to Rara, Chitwan and Lumbini for nineteen days in 2017, views:

I feel that travelling has become a practical empowerment for me because you get to make your own decisions. In my travel, I had to decide whom to talk to, where to stay, when to leave from that place, how long to stay there. When I had to decide everything by myself, I felt empowered. That I could do it. That I can make my own decisions (NepaliTravelers, 2018e, 1:40-2:01).

Along with the empowerment, solo woman travel proves to be an eye-opening experience because, through this journey, women realize many things. Prekchhya Shrestha, apart from feeling empowered, realized something new she shares as we always hear people talk about independence. Everyone says that they want independence but "what I felt because of solo travel is that with independence comes a lot of responsibilities" (NepaliTravelers, 2018e, 3:27-3:52). Her expression on independence, or a sort of self-discovery of inner freedom, is noteworthy. She further says, "We talk about independence that we need freedom but the responsibility that entails deciding our own path, it's very difficult. Only in thoughts, it is liberating but deciding things like should I talk with this person or not, which way should I take are difficult" (ibid., 3:27-3:52). The lesson that independence comes with lots of responsibilities is applicable to all. This statement came from a nineteen-year-old enthusiast Prekchhya Shrestha after her solo travel. It definitely makes it hard to believe that the words came from her mouth because they seem like the words of a highly experienced person. This makes it say that travelling develops maturity in a person who is further enhanced in solo travel. Undoubtedly, solo travel helped her to grow as a person and this is true to all.

As solo woman travel makes women empowered and confident, this helps to shape women's personality too. On their journey, since they have no one to rely upon for things like asking for directions or accommodation, they have to interact with locals. During this course, women who are shy and hesitant to open up with others also have to develop links with people who are new to them. Sharmila Pun, who was twenty-four in 2017 when she solo travelled to Annapurna Circuit and Thorong La trek for twenty days, says, "I wasn't someone who used to travel like this. I used to be scared to get on buses. When I got on a bus, I couldn't even speak to the conductor about my stop." She further confesses, "I was scared even to speak that much. From that phase to here, travelling solo was very challenging for me. But once you've put your mind to it, you can do anything" (NepaliTravellers, 2018f, 2:17-2:38). Pun's experience is clear to justify that solo travel changes one's personality for better. On her journey, she got to see her own transformation from being a shy girl to a bold one; thereby evolving as a new, self-discovered person.

Travelling solo is not just about going to places only; rather, it unlocks one's true self through self-discovery. It is a "learning to navigate around strange places, coping with the practical problems that plague all travelers provide individuals with a sense of power and accomplishment. For these women solo travel involves both a physical journey and also one of self-discovery" (Gibson and Jordan 2005: 208). As solo travel provides ample time for "me time", one can gain immense spiritual gain from it. Bibisha Baniya, a twenty-seven-year-old solo traveler in 2017, who travelled to Annapurna Base Camp and Mardi Himal Trek for twelve days, had time for introspection and realized the truth. She says, "I had so many self-realizations. I looked at the mountains and thought how big is this mountain and we are simply nothing compared to it" (NepaliTravellers, 2018c, 3:57-4:15). This self-discovery of renouncing hubris is a huge lesson to all of us. As she further says, "We fight for petty things. We become jealous towards others and hold anger towards others, but after reaching there...these kinds of things don't matter. So, mountains had almost me like a meditative *dhyani*" (ibid., 3:57-4:15). In the daily hustle, people ignore the spiritual dimension of life and feel unfulfilled but solo travel is such a platform which provides time to reflect on the self; it is when things like a mountain that can be seen a million times come up in a new way in front of us and teaches important lessons as it did to her. Facing the real world in front of us and fighting against the antagonistic circumstances make solo women travelers actualize their independent self.

4. Tackling the obstacles

The solo women travelers have to face hindrances related to the safety issue as number one. Nepalese society still flinches at the idea of a woman travelling solo because travelling solo for women is not a joke and it is highly risky. When navigating alone in the tourism space, solo female travelers are likely to encounter challenges that are more prone to women, such as the feeling of vulnerability and concerns about how their solo presence is perceived by other people as they do not fit into the "correct" or

heteronormalised gender roles. Furthermore, women's status of aloneness can be misinterpreted as promiscuous or sexually available in the liminal tourism space, which leads to solo female travellers perceiving a greater risk of sexualised gaze and gender-based violence compared to male travelers (Yang, Yang & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019).

Despite the risks involved, many Nepali women have gone beyond their fear and have become successful. Having said that, it is not that their journey was trouble-free. Sharmila Dhungana, twenty-three-years-old, who solo travelled for twenty days to Rasuwa and Illam in 2017 has a story to share. One of the challenges that she faced was getting into a situation where a man physically harassed her. She says, "The first thing was I felt into the victim mentality. I blamed myself and that was a very dangerous spot to go into because I am not the person who would not fight back" (NepaliTravelers, 2018b, 1:59-2:54). That was the rush time to decide. She had no time to linger. She made the decision to take the person to police and because, in her words, "I was all by myself, the decision I made to go to the police station and report the person was solely on me and I was actually grateful I was alone in that situation because my decision was not influenced by my family members or my friends" (ibid., 1:59-2:54). After showing such courage and reporting to the police, the harasser was put into jail and expelled from his job too. This made Sharmila realize her strength as a fighter. So, though there are risks in solo travel, it also brings out the best in women in difficult situations.

Women are quite physically challenged for travelling because they have to undergo the menstrual cycle and travel during menstruation periods. Especially in rural Nepal, where women during their menstrual periods are considered impure and not allowed to enter the kitchen or even banished to stay in sheds; women travellers have to face stigma during their menstruation. Twenty-one-year-old Prasansha Rimal while travelling solo to Nuwakot, Lamjung, Gorkha and Palpa districts in 2019 had to undergo a similar situation. She was staying in this homestay in Palpa. She shares the situation as, "I was on my period and I asked the landlady where I could dispose my sanitary napkin but then she started questioning me" (NepaliTravelers, 2020c, 3:33-4:05). The landlady, in her words, started to ask *which day of your period is it?* "If it's before her fourth day, the landlady said, *I would not have let you inside my Kitchen*. Hearing that, I was a little surprised. I was afraid that she would be mad at me. So, I lied. I told her it was after the fourth day of my period (ibid., 3:33-4:05).

While travelling to Upper Dolpo another solo traveler Prasna Dongol got lost in the trail that made her feel very desperate and vulnerable. Had she was with other company of friends, she would have got support from them and together through discussions, they could find a way but alone, there is no one to help her around. On the first few days of her travel, she got off to a rough start. In her words, she had a difficult time enduring the physical challenge of the trek. She was horrified and demoralized. She says, "On the second day of my trekking, I had to sleep in a room full of men. I was so scared that I carried a Swiss knife with me in my pocket and tried as much as possible not to fall asleep" (Aiton, 2018). As she reveals, after winning the challenge, she told to her parents that she was going on a trek to Dolpa, "of course, they were shocked". Her parents were really concerned about the destination, Dolpa, one of Nepal's most remote and isolated regions. Her parents said, in her words, "It's not safe for a woman", but she dared to go to Dolpa. She was lost 8 hours; however, she says, "It took me a great deal to overcome my fear- to find the strength and way back to the trail" (ibid., 2018). As a woman, she felt vulnerable in those moments, but gradually, she gained confidence and learned to make decisions by overcoming fear.

Travelling solo means you are on your own. There is no one to share with. So when twenty-three-year-old Anjana Raut had body pain when travelling solo to the Manaslu circuit for twelve days, she had to manage it all by herself. She remembers that it was a life-changing experience because there was no one to do anything for her when she was travelling alone. To quote her words, "I had to be on my own. the First day, when I went by bus, my whole body haunted a lot and I wanted to apply move but my hands couldn't reach the back. At that time, I wanted to cry so much" (NepaliTravelers, 2018a, 0:53-1:20). While travelling, one has to adjust to the new environment and adjustment is not always easy. It is a challenging task to adapt to the unknown by forgetting one's comfort of the home. Anupama Pithakote, twenty-four, who solo travelled to Arun valley and Namche Bazar for twenty days in 2018 says, "The way they served old and rough rice was very welcoming. But I had an adjustment problem for a while over there" (NepaliTravelers, 2019b, 2:10-2:19). The rice provided to her was so rough that she had to swallow it with the help of water. Similarly, in 2017, twenty-three years old Akshyata Bajracharya had a hard time in her solo travel to Langtang and Gosainkunda for twelve days due to the accommodation problem. She says, "I was travelling alone. So, I had no one to share a room with. So, the people were hesitant to give me a room. Around Lama hotel, there were like six hotels among which I had already been rejected from five", it was a very awkward situation; nobody gave her room. She further writes, "I did get a room at last one. But still, as time passed...I reached there around 2 pm and people would usually get there at 5:00-5:30 pm. So, as time passed, more people started coming in and they asked me to move out. Instead, they asked to live in the dining area" (NepaliTravelers, 2018d, 1:57-2:33).

Solo travelling is adventurous as well as an uncertain act and one can never predict what difficulties one might have to face ahead. This fact is proved by the stories of two solo travelers Neeru Chawal and Nirmala Bhandari. In Chawal's case, she travelled for thirty-five days in the cycle to Terai and Dhorpatan. She faced an unexpected circumstance. In her words, she was going to Lumbini on her cycle when a swarm of bees attacked her. At first, she couldn't even tell what was happening. They started to

sting her all over on her hands, face and body. She was in a lot of pain. She dropped her cycle and bags and just started to run. She confesses, "I was screaming for help. My face, hands and body had so many stingers. My hands were swelling and really painful" (NepaliTravelers, 2020b, 2:52-3:22). She was hospitalized.

Like Chawal, Nirmala Bhandari, faced a severe misfortune at the end of her travel. She had lost her left leg in a road accident in her childhood; she saw the announcement for the *Swo Yatra-2019* (solo travel-2019), she felt it challenging but she dared to take 35 days long solo travel from Kathmandu to Ilam through Mahendra Nagar, Janakpur, Lumbini, to Tansen; it was her first experience of visiting new places and people and taking such a long journey. She visited tea plantations, Janakpur temples, rituals, refugee camps; she met lots of people; ate varieties of foods. There were many challenges, but meeting lots of people and getting help made her travel easy. But in Tansen where she was in a hotel, she got attacked by a dog. She was bitten on her face by the dog. She was so much shocked and did not know what happened to her; she just heard the noises of the crowd. She explains the circumstance in her own words, "The dog at the hotel I was staying at in Tansen bit me on my mouth out of nowhere...the dog had bitten off a piece of my lip (NepaliTravelers, 2020a, 4:45-4:44). The hotel owner took her first to Tansen Hospital; then, the hotel owner took her to Bhairahawa. She came to Kathmandu with the hotel owner through a flight and was admitted in Teaching Hospital with the help of her family and Nepali Travelers team. She also had to receive a long treatment after this unfortunate event. The documentary notes her misfortune as:

On the 35th day of her solo travel, Nirmala was attacked by a dog at a hotel in Tansen. Due to the severity of her injury, she went to a local hospital for immediate care. Later in the same day, the hotel team evacuated Nirmala to Kathmandu for further treatment. Her family and NepaliTravelers met Nirmala to monitor her situation and began consultation with medical professionals (ibid., 5:35-5:37).

She asks in the documentary with her lower lip without flesh, "Why? Why me? Again? At that time I even couldn't make a sound; couldn't speak or eat or even drink water; that is when the world felt very unfair to me" (ibid., 5:40-5:46). With tears in her eyes and obstructed sound, she further expresses her painful event, "If there is god, why do all these things happen to the same person? But I wouldn't show anyone my lip for a really long time. I did not want my family feel bad so I used to sit and cry in the washroom" (ibid., 4:46-6:20). Her words are not words but tears; the words come as tears expressed in the last part of her documentary. While she would cry alone in the washroom, there could be a mirror as a friend to share one's pain, but she says, "But I could not even look at the mirror back then" (ibid., 6:21-6:26). She takes long breathing, looks upward and closes her eyes with her lips open. This is the touchiest moment of silence and painful circumstance in her documentary based on her solo travel painful experience. After she takes a long sigh of relief, the documentary narrates her future with white words in the black screen, "Nirmala has a successful reconstruction surgery in Kathmandu within a few days of her evacuation. The recovery process was challenging. Now Nirmala is back to training for competitive para powerlifting and aspires to represent Nepal across the globe" (ibid., 6:34-6:36).

Traveling in a general sense is to go from one place to another new place. The purposes might be of the multitude. For which, as Nirmala says, we need physical strength. In Nepal, we welcome many travellers from all over the world to climb Mt. Everest or go on treks or hikes in the Himalayas. Nirmala quoting from *Time* talks about a 69-year-old double amputee who has climbed Mt. Everest; other differently-abled people are dreaming of climbing Mt. Everest. These stories really inspire her. Challenging her limitations, in her words, she participated in the 2018 Asian Para-Games, visited Thailand, and was listed as one of the inspiring Women of Nepal in 2018 ((ibid., 7:17-7:28). Nevertheless, she completed the solo woman travel challenge and her further goal is to represent Nepal in the Para-Olympics. The obstacles tackling lessons from the first generation solo women travelers and the hope revealed from their pain are noteworthy.

5. Findings and conclusions

This paper attempts to reveal that solo women travel is not just travelling from one place to another. It is a step of women's self-discovery; it is an eye-opening act as a quest for inner freedom. It is far more than entertainment. Many Nepali women have undertaken solo travel and continue to do so despite several difficulties, not stopping it. As discussed above, it has its own challenges in societies where patriarchy is deep-rooted. The daring decision of solo women travels by boosting women's confidence, shaping their personality, and increasing their mental horizon help to challenge the gender discrimination that prevails in most societies where patriarchy is still dominant. The mindset established as common sense that women are weaker than men and need support from men is being deconstructed by solo women travelers; they have proved otherwise that they too are capable, independent, and can take their own decisions. From their travel experience, it is clear that women are not only the mere shadows of men- they do not need constant supervision from men. In fact, they are as smart, resourceful and strong as their male counterparts, who can be on their own. Women should travel solo for various benefits, as discussed above, regardless of severe obstacles. The misfortunes as well are an asset of new generation enthusiasts to go beyond one's fear and comfort zone and embrace the unknown at one's own risk. Still, solo travel hasn't reached women of different geographies and socio-cultural spheres in Nepal.

A community through *Swo-Yatra* has been engaged to inspire and support Nepali travellers now for those who are eager for solo trips and expeditions. In a society where most people believe females cannot travel alone, it has been proved now that they can travel solo. *Swo-Yatra* challenge has marked 50 examples with narratives and living history as proof that Nepali women can travel solo and break the boundaries. The challenge has also proved that a community of travellers can be formulated informally, which can play a role to pave the way for sustainable and equitable tourism development. The males can support gender equality and make travel stories more inclusive as solo woman travel challenging initiated it. But, it needs to be more inclusive and innovative to reach up the bottom of society. Selecting 50 solo woman travellers from 1800 plus applicants are testimonials of a good beginning, but still, many areas are waiting to be explored and addressed in the travel world in Nepal.

About the Authors

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