

Being Muslim: Unveiling the Voices of Asian Muslim Women Travellers

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Abstract A quick Google search for the keywords Muslim women travel will lead to myriad travel stories online. Undoubtedly, an increasing number of Muslim women are travelling beyond borders, breaking bigotry and gender bias. In light of the dynamic changes in the travel landscape, this study seeks to unveil the voices of Asian Muslim women. It offers an alternative viewpoint as most available discourses propose interpretations of Muslim women by focusing on travel experiences of the Arab Muslim woman. Based on in-depth interviews with 10 Asian Muslim women travellers aged between 22 and 37 years old from four different countries (Bangladesh, Indonesia, Philippines and Malaysia), the findings were explored and explained from three dimensions of empowerment proposed by Kabeer namely resources, agency and achievements. Research findings show that Muslim women in Asia are travelling without abandoning their cultural or religious beliefs. The proliferation of Muslim women travellers contests the view that gendered interpretations of religious texts promote patriarchal orientation in Muslim community that suppresses women leisure. In a way, this paper challenges the continuous misconceptions about Islam and travel among Muslim women. These women learn to unlearn patriarchy by seeking answers in the right places while they learn more about their self, religion and the world.

Keywords Asia · Muslim · Women · Travel · Empowerment

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Introduction

There is no rest in residence for a person of culture and intellect,
 So travel and leave where you're residing!
 Travel! You will find a replacement for what you have left.
 And strive! The sweetness of life is in striving!
 I've seen that water stagnates if still becomes pure if it runs,
 But not if it doesn't flow
 If the lion doesn't leave his den he cannot hunt,
 and the arrow will not strike without leaving its bow
 If the sun stood still in its heavenly course
 Then people, Arab and non-Arab, it would bore
 Gold dust is as the earth where commonly found,
 And in its land, oud is but another wood in store
 If one travels, one becomes sought out
 If one travels, one is honoured like gold

'A Call for Travel' by Imam Shafi'e

The poem by Imam Shafi'e manifests that Muslims regardless of men and women are encouraged to travel, gain knowledge and appreciate the creation of Allah. As one of the four great imams in Islamic history he is well known as the establisher of the Shafie sect observed widely by Muslims across the Asian region. Qur'an and the Sunnah remain as the primary sources of understanding women's rights and position in Islam and it clearly states that for a fact, in Islam women are given equal rights some 1400 years ago. As pointed out by Tucker [49, p. 24] out of a total of 6660 verses in the Quran, only six establish some kind of male authority over women. In Islam, women were never forbidden going out for work, sports or travel. The three aspects that were asked of women were piety, righteousness and good deeds.

Anthropologist Bowen [6] suggests that it is tempting to ascribe features of social life in certain Islamic society towards the way of life that follows from their religious beliefs. Subsequently many discourses in anthropology and tourism have started focusing on female tourist experience that explores behaviour, motivations and challenges of travelling. Our paper offers its ear to the voices of Muslim female travellers from the Asian region. This is to step away from common interpretations on women in Islam by focusing on experiences of the Arab Muslim woman as conclusive. Instead the paper provides a different perspective from Muslim women travellers mainly from Southeast Asia. Islam assumes as the pivotal religion in Asia embedded as a division of a larger multifaceted discourse of 'Asian' values which emphasize the importance of maintaining the social order by prioritizing harmony, consensus, community and family [33]. Continuous misconceptions about Islamic practices that cover gendered restrictions on women travelling travels farthest and farthest than the women herself. Religious dogmas do have an effect on the travel choices and behaviour in general [32] and many Muslim women have countered the omnipresent identity by travelling. One of Islam's central obligations to perform hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca provides opportunity for women to travel. On top that,

women travelled to seek knowledge (rihla), for employment and for leisure. According to Lambert-Hurley [29] the existence of anthologies and studies made of Muslim women's travel writing before the mid-twentieth century indirectly dismisses the notion that travel was a purely male pursuit. However she claims that the voices of these non-European women continue to be veiled and marginalised in this history despite the efforts of some Asian and Middle Eastern scholars to bridge these gender and racial gaps. This paper extends the academic pursuit of scholars such as Kinnaird et al. [27], Aitchison [2], Deem [10], Jordan and Gibson [20], Jafari and Scott [18] plus Khoo-Lattimore and Mura [26] who offer a reconstructed and reinterpreted analysis of tourism from a gendered standpoint. Stewart [45] urges researcher to investigate into how heterogeneous women understands her gender as a social contract as the ability to voice her choices. For Mohee [31] understandings of gendered identities remain grounded in religious or cultural beliefs that draw on different axes or understandings of culture, religion, race and ethnicity. The arguments examine choices women made independently by questioning interpretations of religious dogmas while negotiating and navigating their roles and identity as a Muslim woman.

Literature Review

Islam and Women in Asia

Home to over 65% of the world's Muslim, Islam is the largest religion in Asia with significant of population living in Asia Pacific. According to the report by Pew Centre [35] as of 2010, there were an estimated 1.6 billion Muslims around the world. Governed by the two primary textual sources Qur'an and Hadith, the Arabic word Islam delineates peace, obedience and submission. Varied by several sects and school of thoughts, the practice and restrictions differ from one another where some of the restrictions are related to gendered dimension. Sunni represents the majority of Muslims around the world including Asia. There are four significant schools in Sunni namely Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali with each associated to distinct regions. Shafi'i is prominent in Southeast Asia, Hanafi in western Asia, Maliki in Egypt and North Africa while the most conservative Hambali is evident in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states. Religion is viewed as gatekeeper that represents the community in the way they behave with a set of regulations that lists forbidden acts (haram) and permissible acts (halal). The fascinating rich history that exhibit the golden period of Islamic span from Spain to the caliphate of Ottoman Empire and all over the world. The oldest university in the world, University of al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco was also initiated and built by a Muslim woman. Developments in politics, economic and social, have brought with them profound changes in the status of women in Asia. During the colonial period in Asia, women participated in labour force with cheap wage. Decision making rights and household leadership remained with men that strengthened the male position. Conversely during this time, some restructure of customary laws gave women considerable autonomy. Women were actively involved as anti-colonial rebels. Soon, increased

female literacy with exposure to Western feminism led to women confronting equal gender rights plus greater involvement in politics, economics and social arena. Southeast Asian Islam has traditionally been very tolerant with Muslim women progressing in education, health, employment, social life with acceptance of the idea that a woman can generate and control her own income. Teachings of Islam around Southeast Asia are relatively flexible to handle gender relations with pragmatism considering the changing roles of women from time to time. Considering Asian Muslim women as a collective has undergone vast political, economic and social, that transformed their lives, religion also plays a major role in ensuring the change. Islam and travelling has attracted widespread attention particularly after terrorist attacks and the growing Islamophobia around the world. This in return influenced massive influx of both Western and Muslim travellers to Asian region predominantly around Southeast Asia. Travellers considered the region to be safe for travel added with value for money deals. Recent studies [12, 15, 24, 38, 44, 47] focused on Islam and the needs of travellers in Asian Muslim countries.

Women in Islam

A common fallacy about Islam is the notion that men are in a dominant societal position and women are subordinate to them. However, a Muslim woman's role is observed as integral to that of the man, and vice versa. Islam calls upon its followers to help attain the relative perfection of each other without any adversary or competition to the other. Allah emphasizes fair judgment for both men and women, stressing that it is dependent on one's action and not gender. Although men and women have equal rights, they have different responsibilities and complementary roles best suited to their nature.

“O mankind! Fear your Lord Who (initiated) your creation from a single soul, then from it created its mate, and from these two spread (the creation of) countless men and women.”

(Al-Qur'an, 4:1)

“And according to usage, women too have rights over men similar to the rights of men over women.”

(Al-Qur'an, 2:228)

The verses above from Quran clearly implies similitude between both the genders by expounding that men and women were created from a single entity and are basically equal gender, that is not superior to the other. It is believed that in Islam the coherence of the central belief system is grounded on the relationship between the act of submission (to Allah) and its consequences in a state of peace. Qur'an and hadith both clearly explains the role of women and men in Islam as the vicegerent (*khalifah*) of Allah on earth. The reflections on religious constructs led to misreading the Muslim women's compliance with a religion as seemingly trapped within a patriarchal structure. Ridzuan [36, p. 14] in her study showed that Muslim women were not simply on the receiving end of the machinations of a patriarchal system instead they actively carved their own space within the system by drawing

from the same religious doctrines that men used to uphold their position in society. Having established genuine gender equality, Al Khayat [3] posits that Islam takes further care of women in a number of aspects, particularly in relation to their physical and mental well-being. Tucker [49] confirms Islamic has always recognized, and justified differential treatment of women and men stressing the fact of female agency, the many active ways in which women themselves, and their male allies, have influenced the development of Islamic law and interpretations. Sakai and Fauzia [37] points this out in their study about working middle-class Indonesian Muslim women having informed themselves of Islamic tenets by referring a wide range of sources to perform their acceptable submissive gender role to defend their family from criticism, but tacitly practice an alternative Islamic womanhood that enables them to pursue their desire.

Muslim Women Travelling

“Say, [O Muhammad], ‘Travel through the land and observe how He began creation. Then Allah will produce the final creation’”

(Al-Qur’an, 29:20)

The interpretations of the hadith from Surah Al-Ankabut highlights that Muslims are encouraged to travel and appreciate the creation of Allah. Traveling for women was permitted with family or custodian (mahram) to safeguard women’s safety. Generally mahram refers to a male counterpart whom she is related to by blood such as her father, brother or by marriage such as husband. It clearly shows that the reason for mahram was tied to the circumstances of safety and that where there was sufficient safety, a woman can travel alone without her mahram. Based on various interpretations of statements by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the hadith collections, there is a general understanding that men act as qawwaam (protector and maintainer). Travelling for work or in social spheres such as the mosque, markets or malls are permitted where there are sufficient public and easily accessible. In other context, for obligatory journeys such as hajj the regulations require that women travel with a mahram. In most Asian countries, leisure activities are integrated the concept of *ziarah* (to visit) into *umrah* or *hajj* packages transforming it from a religious-leisure-based journey [48]. Travelling for leisure is also considered permissible without the presence of a mahram with the proviso that safety is assured. With safety being a paramount concern for any women travellers, Islam stresses the need of mahram as protector and not in any way to prohibit a woman from travelling. It was stated in the hadith that propagation of Islam all over the world will provide opportunity for a woman to travel without fearing anything but Allah. In Asian countries Muslim women enjoy better liberties compared to their sisters in the Middle East. Previous research [14, 16, 25, 26, 50]) on Muslim women and travel revealed multiple identities of women that reflect their participation to negotiate their many roles within the boundaries of socio-cultural norms and religious parameters. On top of that Muslim women travellers traveling around Asian countries feel safer as life for women native to those countries are also shaped by Islamic cultural standards. A recent report by J.Walter Thompson’s

Innovation Group titled *The New Muslimah: South-East Asia Focus* [21] classified South-east Asia's Muslim women as young, dynamic and devoted validating that Muslim women now are being career-driven, assertive and more Islamic. The majority of these young Muslimah travel for leisure, with about a third of the women saying they go overseas at least once a year. Some travel alone but most indicate that they travel with family or friends. Even so, 94% of the Muslim women in this report strongly stated that Islam is very important to them. For one, this report substantiates that Muslim women have freedom to travel without abandoning their cultural or religious beliefs. Additionally the report indicates that Muslim women have greater access to technology where four out of five spend at least 4 h a day online. Representing half of the 240 million of Southeast Asia Muslim these Muslim women clearly display a new set of identity, aspirations and behaviours. These women are tacitly upholding an alternative Islamic womanhood by managing their individuality and aspiration through bargaining Islamic theological interpretations of feminism in contemporary Asian Islamic society [17]. Travel becomes a form of self-discovery and connection with the world they live in, predominantly Muslim society.

Theoretical Framework

Religion and cultural norms demarcate, shape and affirm the role and rights of women in public spaces. When discussing empowerment in the context of Asia, it is crucial to preclude arguments within a context of hegemonic Western scholarship. Ridzuan [36] argues that it offer rigid boundaries which form the lines of feminist theoretical framework defined narrowly according to the ideals of emancipation and equality. It is crucial to consider the extent of religious jurisdictions coupled with traditional beliefs which are often regarded as patriarchal structures impact women empowerment. Islam sets the relationship between men and women in a form of fraternity and not in a form of a contention as claimed by some of the feminist movements of today [3]. Muslim women in general are represented as trapped in an Islamic religious paradox and denied of the liberation to leisure. Considering that most arguments of empowerment using feminist framework is commonly based on 'Western' interpretation, religious obligations are often discussed as foundations of the patriarchy that Sehlikoglu [39] claims a term severely critiqued amongst feminists throughout 1980s and 1990s. Johnson [19] defines women's empowerment as

“... gaining a voice, having mobility and establishing a public presence. Although women can empower themselves by obtaining some form of control over different aspects of their daily lives, empowerment also suggests the need to gain some control over power structures, or to change them”

The framework proposed by Kabeer [22] depicts empowerment as a dynamic process based on three dimensions namely resources, agency and achievements. Initially developed to integrate gender concerns into economic planning in developing Asian countries, it will be useful to look at other interrelated socio-cultural dimensions such as religion and leisure. The framework was deemed

suitable as it captures the pre-conditions, process and outcomes of Asian Muslim women gaining access to travel in detail. Subsequently the framework will be useful in explaining empowerment while contesting ethnocentrism. Resources in this case refer to women and their surroundings, rules and norms that enhance the ability to exercise choice. Agency encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose that women bring to their activity describes their ability to act upon the aspiration. The dimensions of resources and agency collectively constitute what Sen [40] refers to achieving the valued ways of ‘being and doing’ by living the lives they want.

Methodology

The finding of this paper is derived from the results of a qualitative interpretive research on women’s travel experiences to understand the underrepresented with a pervasive lens [9]. Adhering to a natural setting [8], the interviews took place in Georgetown, the capital city of Penang. It is well known for its colonial past, historical buildings, heritage trails, food, and multicultural community. Semi-structured interviews in selected informal setting were conducted to allow the ‘voice’ of woman traveller to be heard as a focus of inquiry [43, 46]. To ensure trustworthiness and voluntary participation, the respondents were asked to provide tacit consent by reading and signing a consent form besides audio recording of verbal consent. A copy of the form that contains details of the research as well as the researcher was given to the respondents. The transcribed interview narratives by Muslim women travelers who participated in the study were selected and analysed. Using the five step qualitative analysis process suggested by Patton [34] themes emerging from the data was carefully verified. Nvivo10 facilitated the coding process by recording, sorting, relating and retrieving the codes as required. In addition, the coding frequencies helped in the process of thematic analysis [28]. The women travellers shared information about their background, experiences of travelling and personal travel stories. On the question posted about their religious background in relation to travelling, the travellers shared their individual views, reaction of family members and some religious facts about Islam, women and travelling. Table below summarizes details of the ten Muslim women travellers who participated in the study. Aged between 22 and 37 years old from four different countries namely Bangladesh, Indonesia, Philippines and Malaysia, three of them were married, six were single and one of them divorced. All except one who was an undergraduate had stable jobs. Seven of them wore proper hijab; two covered their hair with bandana type head wraps while one of them appeared un-veiled or free-hair. To provide confidentiality, all the travellers below are identified using pseudonyms agreed by them (Table 1).

Table 1 Detail of respondents

Pseudonym	Country	Marital Status	Age	Employment	Type of travel
Afsana	Bangladesh	Married	25	Social worker	Solo/spouse
Aina	Malaysia	Single	22	Undergraduate	Family/friends
Aley	Malaysia	Single	33	Civil servant	Solo/friends
Azlina	Malaysia	Married	30	Accountant	Family
Fae	Malaysia	Single	34	Assistant engineer	Solo/friends
Ika	Indonesia	Single	31	Administrator	Solo/friends
Jue	Malaysia	Single	37	Civil servant	Solo
Lady	Malaysia	Single	31	Finance officer	Family/friends
Sumy	Philippines	Divorced	34	Social worker	Solo
Tasha	Malaysia	Married	25	Office admin	Solo/family

Findings

Resources (Pre-conditions)

Kabeer [23] theorizes that power is very much related to one's ability to make choices that demands change. When conceptualizing resources, variables such as access to education, employment or financial stability, family and kinship as well as mobility in the public domain are likely to play a role in defining autonomy. Ultimately Muslim men have a privilege position concerning how rules, norms, and conventions are interpreted from Hadith and Al Quran. In this case, they obtain the decision making authority thus the way in which resources are functional depends on the ability of women to define their priorities and enforce their rights. For this Kabeer [23] explains that rules and norms can be seen as intangible “enabling” or “disabling” social resources that are drawn upon in the exercise of power and serve to demarcate the boundaries of choice for different categories of individuals. Asian Muslim women have been actively travelling the globe, while others decide to study or live in various parts of the world. Given that religion reflect and impact the participation of women in the public sphere while influencing their identity is constructed, the narratives shared demonstrate the women's ability to direct the interpretations of their religion by drawing on family's support. Afsana from Bangladesh credits her father for encouraging her to be adventurous

“...I realized that by travelling I can find some time for me to spend alone, which is very difficult for a girl of a conservative patriarchal society like ours. Luckily my father encouraged me to do it, he has always supported whatever I wish to do. My brother and I are treated equally. Education, career choice and even my life partner, my *baba* never forced me. We are staunch Muslims, but our religion never prohibited women accessing education, job or leisure. I am always a Muslim and travelling will not affect that”

Fae, a Malaysian expressed being grateful for gaining the support of her family

“...For me, travelling is experiencing something beyond my expectations, knowing my limits while enduring the obstacles. My family is religious, I am too but, when it comes to travelling, no one in my family prohibited me from travelling alone or with friends. I just have to make sure I take care of myself. Islam in general encourages its followers to explore the world”

Being happily married for 3 years, Azlina is provided testament on how married women are subtly endorsing an alternative Islamic womanhood by juggling their family, career as well as the need for leisure

“...I started working and have been travelling since I was 25 years old, when I was still single. Then I got married and now I am a mother. My husband does not prohibit me from travelling. I will just inform him and get permission before travelling for work or leisure. Nowadays I prefer travelling for leisure with my family. It is my personal choice because it makes me happier to go with them compared to going solo or friends.”

The three narratives reflected women acquiring knowledge about Islam and advocating themselves by reading and researching besides interacting and consulting Islamic teachers. Most single Asian Muslim women get choices to travel solo or with their friends while married women are comfortable to travel with their families. This comes down to their personal choices and preferences. Agarwal [1] claim that South Asian women seek to secure their own self-interest while complying with the cultural norms of self-subordination. This shows women's greater voice within the household is unveiled with greater understanding of religious interpretations. It is what Sakai and Fauzia [37] describe as enabling their gender performativity to counter potential criticisms based on conservative Islamic and cultural gender norms. They posit that Islamic teachings and practices have been transformed and adapted according to the place and time in which Muslim women have found themselves [37, p. 244]. Travel for these women is being in line with Islamic jurisprudence. According to Asbollah et al. [4] travel is perceived by Muslim women as something that reflected their own religious faith, largely due to Islam's rules and principles by which they live in creating a balance between lifestyle and serving God. It further explains how in Islam travel is about reconnecting and appreciating the creation of the creator.

Agency (Process)

Agency refers to the processes by which choices are made and put into effect. For Sehlkoglou [39] agency is no longer a human quality embedded into subjects, but rather formed through a process of interaction between the individuals and the larger social mechanisms such as patriarchal ideologies. It is crucial to attune and capture the fluidity of agency. In the case of travelling, women may not resist to, but find alternative measures to turn away from patriarchal ideologies. Using the knowledge to negotiate and mediate the practice of Islam towards contesting the rigid Islamist ideas of womanhood that are invading the public sphere. Middle East feminist scholar, Mahmood [30] in her study illustrated the extent Muslim women work to

achieve a modest identity by carefully aligning their exterior practices with interior emotions and intentions through the same concept. Under the influence of her work, aspects of agency in the lives of Muslim women, such as liberation and choice, were theorized through their relation to God. The positive sense of ‘power to’ ‘power with’ and ‘power within’ is described by Sen [40] as what a woman is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values she regards as important. Kabeer [22] adds that the process of empowerment often begins from within that encompasses meaning, motivation and purpose the woman bring to their action. The travellers perform their agency with various mechanisms such as using resources to ensure safe and well planned travel that meets the requirement of family and sharing the experiences of other Muslim women travellers in the community. They navigate and negotiate the possibilities within religious parameters that Bhachu [5] argue as continuously changing identities very strategically for wider consumption. For Aley, travelling represents a sense of refinement with ‘power within’ that led her to perceive herself as able and entitled to make decisions. She related her story

“... I first started travelling in 2010 when a friend invited me on holiday in Singapore. I am the only child in my family. Of course my parents were worried at first. Yes, I had to convince them that I will be safe. Then they were fine. It was the first time I was alone, out of my comfort zone but I was happy to be independent. Making my own decision is my freedom. Now I see many Muslim women are travelling, as young as 20. I am happy I started it too. My parents are more flexible now. You know, I have travelled solo to Macau in 2016. I think we just have to gain their trust, ensure that we will be safe. Islam is everywhere now, awareness about Islam too. So, I don’t see why Muslim women shouldn’t travel.”

Jue, another Malaysian traveller started travelling since 2005 relays,

“...12 years ago, I started my first journey. I have been traveling ever since. Travel for me is learning new cultures, meeting new people and tasting new food. Halal food of course (laughing)! My father is an Imam. You might think he is strict, but actually he is the most flexible person. My parents trust their daughter and I will make sure I don’t tarnish their trust and my identity as a Muslim girl. Before I travel, I will always share my travel plans with my family. During my travel, I keep in touch with them. After my trip, I share my travel stories with them. Usually they are more excited than me. I feel happy seeing that. I feel proud and blessed to have that sense of understanding from them.”

Hailing from a religious family, Jue’s enhanced ‘power to’ was practical through her increased individual (though socially dependent) agency of the unlocking of opportunities and live the kind of life one has reason to value [41]. In this context, both women have become empowered through their travel activities. Islam making its mark all over the world has aided women liberty by providing access to Muslim friendly travel. They are able to enjoy crossing borders without worrying about dietary requirements or praying facilities. This will add value to the existing travel concessions where a Muslim traveller who is considered a *musafir* is allowed to

shorten and combine their prayers. Technology has enabled travellers all over the world to gather or share information about Muslim travel. Ika, shares her experience of travelling outside Indonesia

“...Indonesia is a very religious country, but my family in particular dad entrusts me to travel as long as I tell them where I am going, with whom and guarantee them of my safety. I also have to update my whereabouts via WhatsApp. It is not troublesome. I am fine with it because I know they are worried about me. Many Indonesian female are travelling alone now. Take Anisa Syifa for one, our famous solo traveller. She inspired me. I cannot be like her but I want to travel, at least with my friends. My parents know her stories too. I think they get convinced about Muslim women travel reading stories from other travellers like Syifa. We also feel safer coming to Muslim countries like Malaysia. I think there are Muslims everywhere in the world now. Travelling for Muslim women like me will not be a problem. Technology helps too. I booked my hotel room in an all-female floor. Good awareness for Muslim females. At least we are given a choice”

It is clear that in the Asian culture, family plays an important role as the custodian of religion, to ensure that the teaching and practices are intact among the family members. Religion never imposed prohibition for Muslim women to travel and the increased awareness about their rights as a Muslim woman enabled these women to fulfil their passion for travelling. According to *The New Muslimah: South-East Asia Focus* [21] understanding the Southeast Asian Muslimah requires a nuanced approach as they are more cosmopolitan as consumers than older generations of female Muslims and are also more religiously observant. The various ways in which the women travellers practiced and embodied their faith was clearly evident in their narrations. For these women, it was important to have an intellectual understanding of Islam besides a well organised travel plan as they will be expected to explain it and sometimes defend it. Being Muslim, they navigate and negotiate [13] towards shifting deep-rooted interpretations while upholding the virtue of Islamic teachings. The act of submission for them is a religious obligation instead of being disempowered.

Achievements (Outcomes)

This dimension refers to achieving the valued ways of ‘being and doing’ by living the lives they want. Based on the women traveller’s narrations, the juxtaposition of multiple influences and negotiations on travelling and religious obligations highlighted the awareness of when, where and how Asian Muslim women conform or contest the system of belief. Drawing from the liberating statistics that shows a growing number of Asian Muslim women travelling around the globe and their stories, it substantiates that women are not mere passive recipients as they exercise their agency using the resources to negotiate their mobility. They embrace their religion and the parameters of femininity as prescribed. Besides possessing greater access to education, employment and financial stability, they are also tech savvy and well-connected without losing their identity as a Muslim devout. An undergraduate

who will be graduating soon, Aina considers travel changing her perspective about life.

“...I will be graduating soon and entering a new phase in life. Early this year I travelled to Japan with my sister. I would say it was one of a kind experience. We love the culture and people. It was a Muslim friendly destination. On the other hand this trip helped to improve my self-esteem and confidence. When I shared my travel stories on Instagram, I felt happy about myself and I hope to inspire others too. Imam Al-Ghazali said that sharing knowledge is a form of worship (*ibadah*). Islam is a very beautiful religion and I personally want to see more Muslim women travel. Wearing my hijab, looking for halal food, praying five times a day and being cautious about how I behave is my obligation to Allah. I do it willingly from my heart. Being a Muslim woman doesn’t mean I cannot follow my passion and explore the world.”

Being a recent convert who embraced Islam 2 years ago, Sumy, an avid traveller explained that in Islam, traveling is also an important Sunnah where Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) encouraged his followers to seek knowledge as far away to China, indicating that traveling is a good way to expand the horizons of knowledge and experience. Having experienced travelling both as a non-Muslim and now a Muslim, Sumy explicitly narrates

“...One of my greatest achievements is having wonderful conversations about faith and religion with my own family, friends, fellow travellers or locals. Each time, I walk away with a renewed conviction in Islam, wishing to keep learning more. Every time I travel, when I meet people, interact with them or sometimes just sharing a casual *salaam* or hello with them have overwhelmingly been wonderful. Here, in Penang I met so many friendly people. I went to some of the mosques with them. The experience, I could not describe with words. Islam is such a deep religion and that experience, for me was a personal and a great achievement in life”

Travelling is also a form of spreading teachings about Islam while learning more about the religion, it helps to clear misconceptions. For the newly married Tasha, travel enables her to become a better person

“...travel creates the greatest memories. I am lucky to be married to a man who loves to travel too. Recently we visited the Balkan countries. It was an eye-opening trip. It’s people, the history, the culture, the food and many more aspects of Islam. We share the same religion but they have different Muslims lifestyles. You will not be able to get that from reading. Being there and experiencing it is different. I shared and wrote about it in my Instagram, hoping others will be able to go there and learn too.”

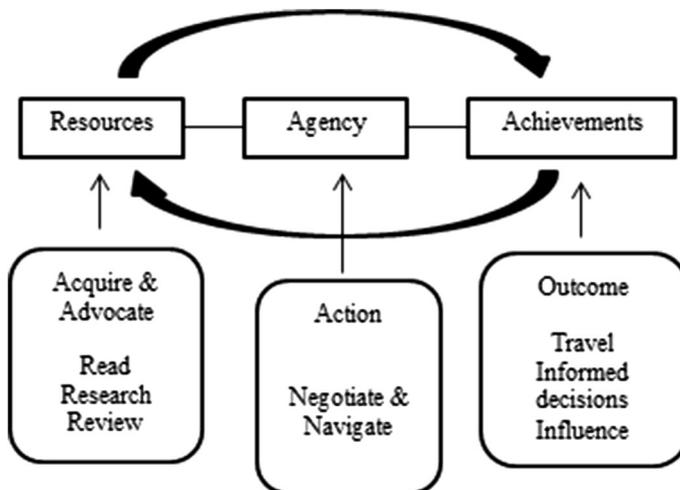
Anecdote from Lady, a spunky traveller from East Malaysia used a Malay proverb as introduction

“...I simply don’t want to be frog under the coconut shell. Living a life with no knowledge of things, or events, or places outside of our ‘world’ is pathetic.

Our religion asks us to be open minded and outspoken. Being a good Muslim is simple. I try to inspire my friends and family to travel. Fortunately it worked. I hope to inspire other women too. I personally think you can even travel your own country first because there is a lot more we have not discovered”

Giving back to the community, the travellers share their experiences about their travel, prayer facilities, halal eatery or attractions to help other Muslim women or any traveller in general make a more informed decision on their travels. The presence of Muslim women in travel market is response to having access to the resources that enabled them to exercise agency while retaining the ‘good Muslim women’ identity which Dwyer [11] posits as Islamic discourses being mobilised by young people in the construction and contestation of identity. The women travellers had achieved their own religious empowerment by being able to adhere to their religious commands without sacrificing the passion for travel.

Discussion: Seeking the Spiritual by Sightseeing



The traveller’s stories shared in this paper are reminders of the past, present and future of Islam. In addition broadening the horizon, Islam asks its followers to travel and gain knowledge while escalating their experiences. Growing interest in travel among Asian Muslim women breaks the stereotypes and misconceptions about women being denied mobility in Islam. Furthermore, it provides a different perspective about women who strengthen their identity without sacrificing being the ‘good Muslim woman’ by negotiating between Islamic values and need for leisure. Travelling for these women was also a mission to influence and help other fellow Muslims to discover the unexplored world and travel without restrictions. Countless

travel stories and photographs of Asian Muslim women travellers found online motivates other Muslim women to travel. Based on the framework as well as the dimensions used, it was clear that Asian Muslim women are showcasing effective agency by functioning their conventional roles and responsibilities and goes further to highlight the transformative agency by acting on the limiting aspects of these roles and responsibilities in order to challenge them. Kabeer [22] describes it as women's action to question, analyse, and act on the structures of patriarchal restrictions. The Muslim women travellers are upholding their Islamic values and performing their responsibilities while pursuing their interest in travel. It is important to acknowledge that the changes in the consciousness and agency of individual women are an important starting point for the processes of empowerment. The three dimensions are interrelated and will impact one another demonstrating the pathways through which the process of empowerment occurs. In the case, individual agency such as negotiations within private sphere leads to public actions or collective agency. Women here are involved the intervening processes as agents of that change rather than merely as its recipients.

Conclusion

According to Scott and Jafari [38] travelling supports the unity of Muslims from different regions of the earth to come together and strengthen the brother- and sisterhood (*sillaturrahim*) of Muslims all over the world. Islam positions men and women as equals albeit with different role priorities that goes to show Islam and the Quran do not establish any inherent spiritual, intellectual or physical inferiority of women [42]. Muslim women's participation in politics, economic and social sector is evident in the Asia Pacific region. During the early days, travelling is often associated with visiting families and relatives or performing obligatory pilgrimage where men and women travelled to Mecca. The influx of young, educated, financially stable Muslim women in travel market depict their capability to travel across borders breaking bigotry and gender bias. Findings of this paper proved that access to education, employment and technology enabled women to negotiate and make informed decision. The proliferation of Muslim women travellers contests the view that gendered interpretations of religious texts promote patriarchal orientation in Muslim community that suppresses women leisure. Asian families are also becoming liberal with men supporting the travel endeavours of women, standing beside them, or behind them. Considering that Islam practices are varied and circumstances in Asian countries like the Southeast Asia are unique, more focus should be given to researching Islam, gender and its relation to travel. Future research could explore in deep the aspect of negotiations and reconstruction of identity by focusing on specific countries or culture in line with claim by Chang [7] about the need for sensitive scholarship to acknowledge the contextual uniqueness and critical conceptualization of the emerging wave in Asian female travelling. On the other hand, in effort to understand the validation of using negotiations, there is a need for further research by seeking expert views on this matter. This paper perceives Asian Muslim women travellers are doing their best by Islam while

continuing their pursuit to travel. They strike a balance between upholding their Islamic values by gaining liberation to travel whilst ensuring that religious demands are respected.

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