

Constructing Selfness and Otherness through the Local Gaze: Gendered Tourism Experiences of Sri Lankan Women

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This study directly aligns with the special issue on "Reciprocal Gaze: Host-Guest Encounters, Gendered Perspectives, and the Politics of Seeing in Tourism" by critically examining how the local gaze operates within host–guest encounters to shape gendered tourism experiences. By focusing on Sri Lankan women, the research shifts attention from the dominant Western tourist gaze to a reciprocal and locally embedded gaze, where hosts simultaneously observe, judge, and differentiate between local and foreign female travelers. The findings reveal how this gaze is gendered and politicized, producing unequal experiences of mobility, visibility, and legitimacy. Through the interconnected lenses of selfness and otherness, the study demonstrates how women internalize these external perceptions, creating a dynamic interplay between seeing and being seen. In doing so, it contributes a Global South perspective to debates on gaze, power, and identity, offering nuanced insights into how gendered subjectivities are constructed within tourism encounters.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare a potential conflict of interest and state it below

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Keywords

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Abstract

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Tourism is a socially constructed space where identities, power relations, and cultural meanings are negotiated. Despite growing participation in tourism, women's experiences in Global South contexts remain underexplored. This study examines how Sri Lankan women construct and negotiate selfness and otherness through the local gaze. An interpretive qualitative approach was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fourteen Sri Lankan women travellers from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, and the data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings show that women's tourism experiences are shaped by the interaction of internalised gender norms and external social expectations. Selfness reflects the ongoing negotiation of identity, agency, and mobility within contexts characterised by moral surveillance, family responsibilities, safety concerns, and restrictive social norms. Otherness emerges through participants' perceptions of foreign women as freer, more confident, and socially privileged. Rather than representing the lived realities of foreign women, these perceptions function as relational imaginaries through which participants interpret their own identities and mobility, thereby reinforcing unequal gendered hierarchies. The study contributes theoretically by conceptualising the local gaze as the mechanism through which selfness and otherness are relationally co-produced, extending understandings of the tourist gaze within a Global South and postcolonial context. Empirically, it foregrounds the experiences of Sri Lankan women, challenging Western-centric assumptions of tourism as inherently empowering. The findings highlight the need for context-specific interventions, including family-friendly tourism infrastructure, more equitable treatment of local and international visitors, and initiatives that challenge restrictive gender norms to support women's participation in tourism.

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In review

Constructing Selfness and Otherness through the Local Gaze: Gendered Tourism Experiences of Sri Lankan Women

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Abstract

Tourism is a socially constructed space where identities, power relations, and cultural meanings are negotiated. Despite growing participation in tourism, women's experiences in Global South contexts remain underexplored. This study examines how Sri Lankan women construct and negotiate selfness and otherness through the local gaze. An interpretive qualitative approach was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fourteen Sri Lankan women travellers from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, and the data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings show that women's tourism experiences are shaped by the interaction of internalised gender norms and external social expectations. Selfness reflects the ongoing negotiation of identity, agency, and mobility within contexts characterised by moral surveillance, family responsibilities, safety concerns, and restrictive social norms. Otherness emerges through participants' perceptions of foreign women as freer, more confident, and socially privileged. Rather than representing the lived realities of foreign women, these perceptions function as relational imaginaries through which participants interpret their own identities and mobility, thereby reinforcing unequal gendered hierarchies. The study contributes theoretically by conceptualising the local gaze as the mechanism through which selfness and otherness are relationally co-produced, extending understandings of the tourist gaze within a Global South and postcolonial context. Empirically, it foregrounds the experiences of Sri Lankan women, challenging Western-centric assumptions of tourism as inherently empowering. The findings highlight the need for context-specific interventions, including family-friendly tourism infrastructure, more equitable treatment of local and international visitors, and initiatives that challenge restrictive gender norms to support women's participation in tourism.

Keywords: Female travellers, solo travel in Sri Lanka, selfness, otherness, tourist gaze, we-mode, feminist tourism

1 Introduction

Tourism is widely recognised as a powerful driver of economic development, cultural exchange, and social transformation. Beyond its economic significance, tourism also functions as a social arena where identities, power relations, and cultural meanings are constructed and negotiated. As tourism has expanded globally, scholarly attention has increasingly focused on the experiences and identities of different social groups, with women's participation emerging as an important area of inquiry (Ferguson, 2011; Yang et al., 2019). Women contribute across multiple dimensions of tourism, including

hospitality, accommodation, guiding, and entrepreneurship (Hutchings et al., 2020). However, the gendered dynamics shaping women's tourism experiences remain insufficiently understood, particularly in non-Western contexts.

Research shows that tourism can offer women opportunities for empowerment, independence, and self-discovery, particularly through independent travel (Wilson & Little, 2008; Yang et al., 2019). However, much of this literature is grounded in Western contexts and pays limited attention to how cultural norms, gender expectations, and social structures shape women's mobility in the Global South (Ferguson, 2011). In many Asian societies, women's travel is embedded within social expectations surrounding family responsibilities, appropriate public behaviour, and gendered mobility, requiring women to negotiate personal aspirations alongside collective cultural expectations.

To understand these experiences, this study draws on the concepts of selfness and otherness. Selfness refers to individuals' understandings of their identity, agency, and aspirations within particular social contexts (Bruner, 1991; Chambers & Buzinde, 2015), while otherness reflects the identities and meanings imposed through others' perceptions and judgements (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2005; Long, 1998). Within tourism, these concepts are relational rather than oppositional; women's understandings of themselves are continually shaped through interactions with others and the social environments they inhabit.

This relational perspective is further informed by the concept of the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990). While tourism research has traditionally examined how tourists gaze upon destinations and local communities, more recent scholarship recognises the gaze as multidirectional and embedded within broader relations of power (Samarathunga et al., 2020; Wassler & Kirillova, 2019). In this study, particular attention is given to the local gaze, the ways in which local communities observe, interpret, and evaluate both tourists and fellow local tourism participants. For women, these processes of seeing and being seen can shape opportunities for mobility, participation, belonging, and identity within tourism spaces.

These dynamics are especially relevant in Sri Lanka, where tourism intersects with deeply embedded cultural expectations surrounding gender and women's roles. Although women's participation in tourism is increasing, social norms continue to privilege domestic responsibilities and regulate women's presence in public spaces (Handaragama & Kusakabe, 2021; Jayathilake & Samarathunga, 2023). Women travelling independently or participating in tourism activities outside conventional gender roles may therefore encounter social surveillance, moral judgement, or discrimination (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000). Tourism experiences are consequently shaped not only by women's own aspirations but also by the local gaze through which they are observed, evaluated, and positioned within society.

Despite growing scholarship on gender and tourism, research on women's tourism experiences in the Global South remains limited. Existing studies remain dominated by Western perspectives, leaving important gaps in understanding how women negotiate tourism across different socio-cultural contexts (Kinnaird & Hall, 1994; Tucker & Akama, 2012). Moreover, the role of the local gaze in constructing women's experiences through social judgement, surveillance, and gendered expectations has received relatively little attention (Samarathunga & Cheng, 2021; Scheyvens, 2000). Equally underexplored is how selfness and otherness are relationally co-constructed through these locally embedded interactions.

Addressing these gaps, this study examines the tourism experiences of Sri Lankan women through the conceptual lenses of selfness, otherness, and the local gaze. It explores how women negotiate identity, agency, aspirations, and constraints while simultaneously responding to social expectations and gendered forms of surveillance. By foregrounding women's lived experiences, the study contributes to debates on gender, mobility, and social sustainability in tourism. It extends understanding of how identities are relationally constructed within Global South tourism contexts.

2 Literature review

Tourism is increasingly understood as a socially constructed space where identities, power relations, and cultural meanings are negotiated. Within this context, gender has emerged as a critical dimension influencing participation, experience, and representation in tourism. While women's involvement in tourism has grown globally, their experiences remain shaped by cultural norms, societal expectations, and structural inequalities (Ferguson, 2011; Yang et al., 2019).

2.1 Women's Travel Motivations and Risks

Female travel has become a significant trend in recent years. Women increasingly travel independently to experience freedom, challenge societal norms, and build self-confidence (Aitchison, 2005). Yang (2021) notes that this trend is influenced by broader social changes, including increased economic independence, delayed marriage, and changing gender roles. Yet women's travel motivations are diverse and multifaceted, encompassing personal growth, cultural exploration, leisure, and social connection (Uysal et al., 1996). Travel can serve as a platform for self-discovery, allowing women to explore new identities and gain confidence (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998).

Despite these opportunities, women travellers often face unique risks and challenges. Safety concerns, including harassment, discrimination, and cultural restrictions, remain significant barriers (Pizam & Mansfeld, 2006). Women may also encounter limitations on mobility and participation due to local customs and gender norms (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Wilson and Little (2008) describe women's travel experiences as shaped by a "geography of fear," where freedom is accompanied by constant risk assessment and precautionary behaviour. This highlights the complex nature of women's mobility, which involves balancing independence with safety considerations. These experiences suggest that women's travel is not solely determined by individual motivations but is also influenced by the social and cultural environments within which mobility occurs. Consequently, understanding women's tourism experiences requires attention not only to why women travel, but also to how their mobility is interpreted, negotiated, and experienced within different socio-cultural contexts.

2.2 Feminist Perspectives in Tourism

Feminist theory provides a critical framework for understanding gender inequalities and power relations within tourism. It emphasises that tourism is not a neutral space but one shaped by patriarchal structures that influence women's access to opportunities, mobility, and representation (Aitchison, 2005; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000). One key contribution of feminist tourism research is its focus on empowerment and agency. Travel is often framed as a means for women to achieve self-discovery, independence, and personal growth (Wilson & Little, 2008). Benjamin and Schwab (2023) argue that women's travel experiences can act as forms of resistance against restrictive gender norms, allowing them to reclaim public spaces and assert autonomy.

However, feminist scholars caution against overly simplistic narratives of empowerment. Ferguson (2011) highlights that women's participation in tourism does not automatically lead to gender equality, as structural inequalities often persist within tourism systems. Similarly, Kalisch and Cole (2023) emphasise the need for gender justice in tourism, advocating for structural changes that address systemic barriers rather than focusing solely on individual empowerment. These perspectives suggest that women's tourism experiences are shaped not only by individual agency but also by the broader social and cultural structures within which gendered identities are negotiated.

A key development in feminist theory is intersectionality, which recognises that women's experiences are shaped by multiple social identities, including race, class, ethnicity, and nationality (Kalisch & Cole, 2023). This perspective is particularly relevant in tourism, where women's experiences vary significantly across cultural contexts. For example, women in the Global South often navigate more restrictive social norms and expectations compared to their Western counterparts, highlighting the need for context-specific analysis (Tucker & Akama, 2012). Accordingly, understanding women's tourism experiences requires moving beyond universal assumptions of empowerment to examine how identity, agency, and gendered expectations are socially and culturally negotiated within specific contexts.

2.3 Selfness and Otherness in Tourism

Selfness refers to an individual's perception of identity, agency, and personal meaning within socially embedded contexts (Bruner, 1991; Chambers & Buzinde, 2015). In tourism, selfness extends beyond individual self-exploration to reflect how identities are negotiated within culturally structured expectations. While travel is often associated with autonomy, identity construction, and transformation (Crick, 2013), such processes are not universally experienced. This aligns with Tuomela's (2006) concept of "we-mode" cognition, where individual intentions are subordinated to collective goals. Accordingly, this study understands selfness through a we-mode orientation, where women align their mobility with social norms, obligations, and shared expectations. This contrasts with the "I-mode", more commonly associated with Western and male travellers, where decisions are guided by individual preferences and personal autonomy (Cave & Ryan, 2007; Little & Wilson, 2005). For many women in non-Western contexts, mobility is therefore not solely an expression of independence, but a negotiated practice shaped by relational identities, cultural expectations, and collective responsibilities. Rather than representing a fixed or purely internal sense of identity, selfness is continually negotiated through women's interactions with socio-cultural environments in which tourism experiences occur.

Recent studies on Asian women travellers reinforce this understanding. For instance, Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, and Arcodia (2018, 2017) argue that female solo travel is closely linked to self-development, empowerment, and identity formation among Asian women. Similarly, Yang, Yang and Khoo-Lattimore (2019) highlight that a desire for independence and self-growth often shapes women's travel experiences. However, these aspirations are negotiated within socio-cultural constraints.

Conversely, otherness refers to the process through which individuals are perceived as different, often leading to marginalisation or stereotyping (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2005; Long, 1998). In tourism contexts, otherness is commonly associated with how tourists and local communities construct and interpret differences along lines of gender, ethnicity, or cultural background (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015). Women travellers often encounter otherness through social judgment, surveillance, and gendered expectations. These processes of differentiation not only shape how others perceive women but may also influence how they understand their own identities and positions within tourism spaces.

The relationship between selfness and otherness is inherently interconnected. Experiences of being “othered” can shape an individual’s self-perception, while a strong sense of self may enable individuals to navigate and resist external judgments (Smith & Kelly, 2006; Reimer, 2021). In tourism, this dynamic is particularly evident among women, whose mobility and behaviour are often evaluated through gendered cultural norms. Rather than existing as separate concepts, selfness and otherness can therefore be understood as relational and mutually constructive processes, continuously shaped through interactions between individuals and the socio-cultural contexts in which tourism takes place. This relational understanding provides a foundation for examining how women’s identities are constructed through the local gaze within tourism encounters.

2.4 The Local Gaze in Tourism

The concept of the tourist gaze, introduced by Urry (1990), describes how tourists observe and interpret destinations through socially constructed lenses. However, later studies have expanded this concept to include the local gaze, which refers to how local communities perceive and respond to tourists (Wassler & Kirillova, 2019). The local gaze is particularly relevant in understanding gendered tourism experiences. It reflects the attitudes, expectations, and judgments of local communities toward individuals within tourism spaces (Chhabra, 2010). For women travellers, the local gaze can shape experiences through both positive and negative interactions, influencing their sense of safety, belonging, and agency. Beyond influencing women’s immediate experiences, the local gaze also provides a social context through which identities are interpreted, negotiated, and understood within tourism encounters.

Research suggests that the local gaze can facilitate cultural exchange and mutual understanding by enabling meaningful interactions between tourists and host communities (Dodds, 2020). However, it can also reinforce stereotypes and gendered norms. Zhang and Hitchcock (2017) demonstrate that women travellers may encounter restrictions or judgments based on cultural expectations, while Zhao, Zhu, and Hao (2018) highlight the local gaze’s role in shaping perceptions of safety and vulnerability.

Importantly, the local gaze is not uniform but varies based on factors such as nationality, race, and socio-economic status. Studies indicate that foreign women are often perceived differently from local women, sometimes receiving greater freedom or admiration due to perceptions of modernity and independence (Wassler & Kirillova, 2019). In contrast, local women may face stricter scrutiny and moral judgment, reflecting deeper societal norms and gender expectations. These contrasting perceptions suggest that the local gaze does more than differentiate between local and foreign women; it also shapes how women understand themselves in relation to others. Through these interactions, selfness and otherness become relationally constructed rather than independently experienced.

Despite growing recognition of the local gaze in tourism research, limited attention has been given to how it shapes the interconnected construction of selfness and otherness among women in Global South contexts. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how the local gaze contributes to the construction of selfness and otherness among Sri Lankan women in tourism. In doing so, it offers a relational understanding of women’s tourism experiences within a Global South context.

3 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the gendered experiences of Sri Lankan women travellers through the conceptual lenses of selfness and otherness, with particular attention to the role of the local gaze. Given the exploratory nature of the research and its focus on lived

experiences, a qualitative approach is considered most appropriate, as it enables an in-depth understanding of subjective meanings, perceptions, and social interactions that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Within this paradigm, meanings are co-constructed through participants' lived experiences and the researcher's interpretations, making it particularly appropriate for examining how gendered identities and tourism experiences are negotiated through socio-cultural interactions. The study is grounded in an interpretivist philosophical paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through individuals' interpretations of their experiences (Saunders, 2009). This perspective is particularly relevant in examining gendered tourism experiences, where meanings associated with mobility, identity, and social expectations are shaped through cultural and societal interactions.

An inductive research approach was employed, allowing patterns, meanings, and themes to emerge from the data rather than testing pre-existing hypotheses. Inductive reasoning is particularly suitable for studies addressing underexplored contexts, such as gendered travel experiences in the Global South, as it facilitates theory development grounded in empirical observations (Thomas, 2006). Within this framework, the study adopts a phenomenological orientation to capture participants' lived experiences and to understand how they interpret their travel encounters. Phenomenology is widely used in qualitative research to explore how individuals make sense of their experiences and assign meaning to social phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This orientation is particularly valuable in understanding how women interpret their experiences of mobility, social expectations, and the local gaze within tourism contexts.

The study focuses on Sri Lankan women travellers as primary participants, thereby capturing diverse perspectives on female mobility. The sample represents a cross-section of Sri Lankan society, encompassing varied professional backgrounds, industries, and educational levels (Table 1). A non-probability sampling strategy combining purposive and snowball techniques (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) was employed. Purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of participants with differing levels of travel experience, while snowball sampling enabled access to additional information-rich cases. The final sample comprised 14 participants, consistent with qualitative research emphasising depth over generalisation.

Participants were eligible if they were Sri Lankan women aged 18 years or older who had undertaken at least one leisure trip within Sri Lanka during the previous five years, were willing to reflect on their tourism experiences, and provided informed consent. Purposive sampling ensured diversity in age, marital status, occupation, and geographical location. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, with no substantially new themes emerging *in successive interviews, indicating sufficient depth* to address the study's aims (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Fossey et al., 2002).

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which balance flexibility and consistency, enabling participants to articulate their experiences in their own words while maintaining alignment with the research objectives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). A single interview guide was developed and used across all participants, covering themes such as travel experiences, perceived barriers, motivations, and societal expectations. Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and via telephone, each lasting approximately 20 to 40 minutes. *All interviews were conducted in Sinhala, the participants' first language, enabling them to articulate their experiences comfortably and meaningfully. With informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim in Sinhala, and subsequently translated into English. Consistent with the interpretivist approach, translation considered culturally embedded meanings and expressions rather than relying solely on*

literal translation. Ethical standards were maintained throughout the study, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and participants' right to withdraw at any stage (Orb et al., 2004). Interview transcripts were anonymised using pseudonymous identifiers (e.g., Res1) to protect participants' identities, and no personally identifiable information was included in the manuscript. Audio recordings and research data were securely stored on a password-protected device accessible only to the first author and managed in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines.

Table 1: Demographic profile of the respondents

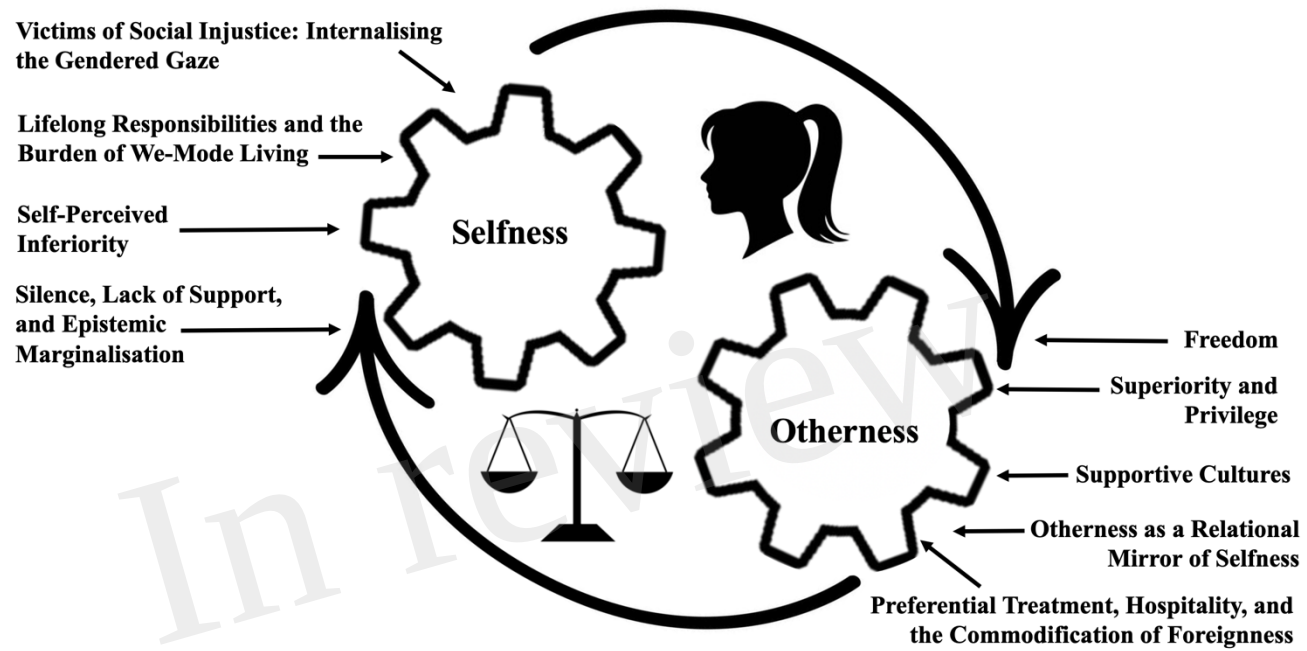
Synonym	Age	Marital Status	Occupation	Place of the Interview	Travel Frequency (last 05 years)
Res1	30-40	Single	Self-employed (businesswoman)	Colombo	6 – 10
Res2	20-30	Single	Teacher	Negombo	1 – 5
Res3	40-50	Married	Executive	Dambulla	1 – 5
Res4	50-60	Single	Tour Guide	Kandy	10 – 15
Res5	40-50	Married	Home maker	Kandy	1 - 5
Res6	50-60	Married	Self-employed (businesswoman)	Kalutara	1 – 5
Res7	30-40	Single	Unemployed	Kurunegala	1 – 5
Res8	40-50	Divorced	Management Assistant	Rathnapura	6 – 10
Res9	40-50	Married	Doctor	Bandarawela	10 – 15
Res10	40-50	Married	Waitress	Trincomalee	5 – 10
Res11	20-30	Single	Students	Colombo	5 – 10
Res12	20-30	Married	Executive	Galle	5 – 10
Res13	30-40	Married	Home maker	Kurunegala	10 – 15
Res14	30-40	Divorced	Journalist	Anuradhapura	15 - 20

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, repeatedly reviewed to achieve familiarisation, and manually coded iteratively. Initial codes were progressively grouped into broader categories, with the researchers moving recursively between the data, codes, and emerging interpretations to ensure that the analysis remained grounded in participants' accounts. This process generated two interconnected themes: selfness and otherness. *Selfness* encompassed experiences of social injustice, lifelong responsibilities, self-perceived inferiority, silence, limited support, and epistemic marginalisation. *Otherness* captured perceptions of freedom, privilege, supportive cultures, discrimination, and the relational construction of the 'other' in contrast to the self. Together, these themes illuminate how the local gaze shapes women's identities and tourism experiences within the Sri Lankan context (Figure 1).

Consistent with an interpretivist approach, the study maintained reflexivity by recognising that researchers and participants co-constructed knowledge (Palaganas et al., 2017). The research team engaged in ongoing discussions to critically reflect on how their disciplinary backgrounds, lived experiences, and cultural perspectives shaped data collection and interpretation. The first author contributed lived experience of gendered constraints on women's mobility in Sri Lanka, while the second author brought expertise in family tourism and gendered spaces from a Global North perspective. The third author provided context-specific knowledge of Sri Lankan socio-cultural norms.

These complementary perspectives strengthened the analysis by challenging assumptions and keeping interpretations grounded in participants' narratives.

Figure 1: A Relational Model of the Gendered Local Gaze and the Construction of Selfness and Otherness



The study's trustworthiness was enhanced using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through in-depth engagement with participants and verbatim transcripts, while transferability was facilitated by providing rich contextual descriptions. Dependability was strengthened through a transparent and systematic analytical process, and confirmability was strengthened by grounding interpretations in participants' accounts. Regular peer debriefing enabled the research team to critically discuss emerging codes and themes, resolve interpretive differences through iterative reference to the interview transcripts, and enhance the credibility of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Theme 1: Selfness – Internalised Constraints, Negotiated Agency, and Emotional Geographies of Mobility

The concept of selfness in this study captures the internalised dimensions of women's travel and probable travel experiences, how Sri Lankan women perceive themselves, negotiate their identities, and interpret their own mobility within a socio-cultural context that simultaneously constrains and disciplines them. Extending beyond a simple psychological construct, selfness is understood here as a socially produced and relational phenomenon, shaped through continuous interactions with cultural norms, gendered expectations, and the internalisation of the local gaze.

4.1.1 Victims of Social Injustice: Internalising the Gendered Gaze

A dominant feature of selfness, emerging from this study, is the internalisation of the local gaze, whereby women come to anticipate and normalise gendered social injustice. Rather than merely experiencing discrimination, participants described how continuous observation and moral evaluation became [part of their understanding](#) of appropriate behaviour. The findings suggest that the local gaze operates not only as an external mechanism of surveillance but also as a relational process through which women construct their identities and regulate their mobility.

As one respondent noted:

“The way local men, including even the police, look at local women is quite negative. There’s always a kind of pessimistic attitude. But when it comes to foreign women, people don’t seem to view them in the same negative way” (Res2)

This statement reflects how surveillance is not only external but also internalised, aligning with Foucault’s notion of panoptic power, where individuals regulate their own behaviour in anticipation of being watched (Hollinshead, 1999). The local gaze becomes embedded within women’s self-perception, influencing how they dress, behave, and even imagine their travel possibilities. Importantly, selfness is constructed relationally, as women interpret themselves through these socially embedded comparisons.

The normalisation of double standards further reinforces this internalisation:

“Having a drink has become somewhat acceptable for local women in big cities nowadays. However, it’s still considered a big deal if a local woman is seen holding a glass of liquor, whereas a foreign woman drinking is viewed as normal.” (Res6)

Such narratives reveal how morality is unevenly distributed across sectors, with local women held to stricter standards of respectability. This aligns with feminist critiques of tourism that highlight how women’s bodies are regulated through moral discourses (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000). Importantly, these moral expectations are not merely imposed but are internalised, shaping women’s self-regulation and limiting their willingness to engage in leisure activities. The stigma attached to solo female travel further illustrates this dynamic. The local gaze therefore contributes to the construction of selfness by encouraging self-monitoring and [anticipating](#) social judgement.

“No matter the age, education, or profession, society tends to look at any local woman travelling alone as a woman of bad character” (Res4)

Here, mobility itself becomes a moral issue. Travel is not seen as a neutral or empowering activity but as a wrongdoing of gender norms. This finding supports Ateljevic and Doorne (2005), who argue that [patriarchal societies often frame women’s mobility as deviant](#). Internalising such narratives leads women to question their legitimacy as travellers, reinforcing a cycle of constraint. Moreover, the association between women’s public presence and viewing them as sex symbols intensifies this surveillance:

“If a local woman is standing by the roadside at dusk or at night, society may assume she is involved in inappropriate or dirty work” (Res2)

334 This reflects the sexualisation of women's bodies in public spaces, where visibility is equated with
335 availability. Such perceptions contribute to what Phadke (2013) describes as the "hostile city," where
336 women's presence is constantly negotiated through fear and moral judgment. Consequently, women's
337 selfness is shaped through continual negotiation between personal aspirations and socially imposed
338 expectations.

339 4.1.2 Lifelong Responsibilities and the Burden of We-Mode Living

340 A second critical dimension of selfness is the internalisation of lifelong responsibilities, which are
341 deeply rooted in Sri Lanka's collectivist culture. Women's identities are constructed through relational
342 roles, as daughters, wives, mothers, and caregivers, rather than as independent individuals. This aligns
343 with Tuomela's (2006) concept of "we-mode" cognition, where individual intentions are subordinated
344 to collective goals. Rather than being viewed as autonomous individuals, women construct their
345 identities through relationships with others, reflecting a we-mode orientation toward everyday life and
346 mobility. The following quote captures this life-cycle of obligation:

347 *"From a young age, they are expected to listen to and obey their parents; after*
348 *marriage, they are expected to obey their husbands, and later, even their children"*
349 (Res1)

350 This narrative illustrates how women's lives are structured around continuous obedience and service,
351 leaving little room for personal aspirations such as travel. The expectation of constant caregiving
352 reinforces gendered divisions of labour, where women's time and mobility are limited by domestic
353 responsibilities (Hancock et al., 2014). Marriage further intensifies these expectations:

354 *"When a married woman travels, society will say that this woman does not love her*
355 *family"* (Res2)

356 Here, travel is constructed as incompatible with the given role. Women who prioritise their own travel
357 are perceived as neglecting their familial duties, reflecting broader societal norms that devalue
358 women's leisure (Ferguson, 2011). This aligns with Kinnaird and Hall's (1994) argument that tourism
359 is gendered, with men's mobility normalised and women's mobility questioned.

360 The inability to delegate responsibilities further contributes to these constraints:

361 *"We, as women, have to take care of children, elderly family members, and even pets.*
362 *There's usually no one to take over those responsibilities so that we can travel."* (Res8)

363 This highlights the absence of structural support systems, such as affordable childcare and caregiving
364 services, which are more prevalent in developed contexts and rare in developing countries in Sri Lanka.
365 As a result, women's mobility is not only socially restricted but also structurally constrained. The local
366 gaze reinforces this orientation by defining socially acceptable femininity through responsibility,
367 sacrifice, and care. Consequently, women come to evaluate themselves against these expectations,
368 incorporating them into their sense of self. Selfness therefore emerges through continual balancing
369 between personal aspirations and collective obligations, rather than through unrestricted individual
370 choice. This reflects Tuomela's (2006) concept of we-mode, whereby decisions are guided primarily
371 by collective goals and shared responsibilities rather than individual preferences.

372 Importantly, these responsibilities are not always experienced as imposed; they are often internalised
373 as moral obligations. Women derive a sense of identity and worth from fulfilling these roles, making
374 it difficult to prioritise personal desires. This reflects complex facets of selfness, where agency and
375 constraint coexist and women actively participate in maintaining the very structures that limit them
376 (England, 1994).

377 These findings suggest that mobility is understood not merely as physical movement but as a socially
378 negotiated practice embedded within cultural expectations. Women's identities as travellers are
379 therefore constructed relationally through their obligations to family members and through the
380 anticipation of how others will evaluate their fulfilment of these responsibilities. Rather than limiting
381 agency completely, these expectations reshape how women define legitimate travel and acceptable
382 mobility.

383 Collectively, these findings demonstrate that selfness is produced through the interaction between
384 collective responsibility and the local gaze. Women's travel decisions are continuously negotiated
385 within family relationships, illustrating that mobility is experienced as a relational rather than purely
386 individual practice.

387 **4.1.3 Self-Perceived Inferiority**

388 A particularly revealing aspect of selfness is the emergence of self-perceived inferiority, where women
389 evaluate themselves in relation to foreign female travellers. The findings indicate a complex emotional
390 landscape shaped by admiration, jealousy, and pity. These perceptions did not emerge solely from
391 personal experience but from continual exposure to the local gaze and the unequal ways local and
392 foreign women are socially evaluated.

393 *"I feel jealous about foreign women... I also feel very pity and pathetic about Sri Lankan*
394 *women"* (Res7)

395 This quote reflects the internalisation of global inequalities, with Western women perceived as symbols
396 of freedom and empowerment and Sri Lankan women as comparatively constrained. Rooted in
397 postcolonial histories that privilege Western identities while marginalising local ones (Tucker, 2007),
398 these comparisons reveal how participants constructed selfness relationally through the imagined
399 'other'. Another respondent mentioned:

400 *"I feel sad that local women are often helpless—they can't go to the places they wish to*
401 *go"* (Res6)

402 This sense of helplessness reflects diminished agency, in which women perceive themselves as
403 incapable of overcoming structural barriers. The internalisation of inferiority is further reinforced by
404 comparisons with foreign women, whose perceived strength and independence are given. The role of
405 confidence is also particularly significant:

406 *"Our women often find it difficult to face things on their own. They may lack the*
407 *confidence to travel, manage situations independently, or even to question"* (Res6)

408 Confidence is not simply an individual attribute but is socially constructed through opportunities, lived
409 experiences, and cultural expectations. Consistent with Yang et al. (2017), participants associated
410 empowerment with the ability to negotiate risks and exercise agency. These comparisons reinforced

411 symbolic hierarchies in which foreign women were perceived as confident and independent, while
412 local women were viewed as dependent and constrained. Through the local gaze, participants evaluated
413 themselves against these unequal standards, with fear emerging as a central influence on self-
414 perception:

415 *“Fear and doubt of what will happen next, haunt local women’s minds”* (Res8)

416 This aligns with the concept of emotional geographies, where emotions such as fear are spatially
417 embedded and influence mobility patterns (Pain, 2001). Women’s fear is not irrational but is grounded
418 in real experiences of harassment and violence. However, it is also amplified through social narratives
419 that describe women as vulnerable and in need of protection. Night travel emerges as a particularly
420 restricted domain:

421 *“Local women often cannot travel at night because they feel afraid”* (Res5)

422 This reflects the temporal dimension of gendered space, where certain times are deemed unsafe for
423 women, further limiting their mobility.

424 Importantly, these perceptions should not be interpreted as objective differences between local and
425 foreign women. Rather, they reflect the relational construction of selfness, whereby women’s identities
426 are shaped through ongoing comparisons with socially idealised representations of foreign female
427 travellers. This finding provides a direct conceptual bridge to the next theme (Otherness), where the
428 characteristics attributed to foreign women become central to understanding how these relational
429 hierarchies are produced.

430 **4.1.4 Silence, Lack of Support, and Epistemic Marginalisation**

431 Another important category within selfness is the perception of being unheard and unsupported.
432 Women expressed a profound sense of invisibility, where their concerns and experiences are not
433 acknowledged by society or institutions. Participants described not only a lack of practical support for
434 travelling but also a lack of social recognition for their aspirations, concerns, and experiences. Their
435 voices were frequently dismissed, questioned, or considered less legitimate, contributing to a form of
436 selfness characterised by constrained expression rather than open participation.

437 *“There is no one to protect local women, no one to motivate them to travel, and no one
438 to guide or support them”* (Res1)

439 This highlights a systemic failure to address women’s needs, reflecting what feminist scholars describe
440 as epistemic marginalisation, in which certain voices are excluded from mainstream narratives (Hesse-
441 Biber, 2012). Another respondent explained:

442 *“I don’t think that anyone wants to hear what we feel”* (Res14)

443 These accounts suggest that women’s silence is not simply an individual choice but a socially produced
444 response to anticipated judgement. The local gaze encourages women to regulate not only their
445 behaviour but also what they feel able to express, reinforcing self-censorship within both family and
446 broader social contexts.

447 This lack of recognition contributes to a sense of disempowerment, in which women feel their
448 experiences are insignificant or irrelevant. The absence of supportive structures, such as legal

449 protections, advocacy groups, and gender-sensitive tourism policies, further intensifies this
450 marginalisation. The role of media and societal narratives also contributes to this silence:

451 *“Even the news reports are like that, stories about local women travelling alone and*
452 *facing the problems and difficult situations” (Res4)*

453 Such media narratives reinforce fear and discourage women from travelling, creating a culture of
454 caution rather than empowerment.

455 Rather than viewing women's mobility as legitimate, participants described how family and societal
456 expectations prioritised domestic responsibilities over personal aspirations. The absence of emotional
457 and institutional support further reinforced the perception that travel was secondary to collective
458 obligations. Collectively, these findings show that selfness is socially constructed through the interplay
459 of the local gaze, gendered responsibilities, unequal social recognition, and internalised expectations.
460 Participants' identities as travellers were shaped by responsibility, surveillance, inferiority, and silence,
461 producing constrained agency in which the desire to travel was limited by both internalised and
462 structural barriers.

463 Selfness was also inherently relational. Participants understood themselves through comparisons with
464 foreign women, illustrating how selfness and otherness are mutually constituted. These comparisons
465 reinforced internalised inequalities and reproduced gendered constraints, highlighting selfness as a
466 useful lens for understanding the emotional and psychological dimensions of women's tourism
467 experiences.

468 **4.2 Theme 2: Otherness – Constructing the Foreign Female Traveller Through Hierarchies of** 469 **Freedom, Power, and Desire**

470 While selfness captures the internalised constraints that shape Sri Lankan women's mobility, otherness
471 reflects how foreign female travellers are constructed as symbolic counter-partners, embodying
472 freedom, privilege, and desirability. This theme is not merely about perceptions of difference; it reveals
473 how postcolonial imaginaries, economic asymmetries, and tourism practices collectively produce a
474 hierarchy of femininities within the same spatial context.

475 **4.2.1 Freedom**

476 A central dimension of otherness was the construction of foreign female travellers as free, independent,
477 and socially accepted. Rather than portraying freedom as an inherent characteristic of foreign women,
478 participants understood it relationally through comparison with their own socially constrained lives.
479 Foreign women were perceived as being free from domestic responsibilities, social surveillance, and
480 the moral expectations that shaped local women's mobility. Consequently, their perceived freedom
481 became a mirror through which participants interpreted their own limited opportunities to travel:

482 *“When foreign women visit here, it usually means they've been able to leave their*
483 *responsibilities with someone else—so in that sense, they are freer than local women”*
484 *(Res10)*

485 This perception reflects structural inequalities between Global North and Global South contexts, in
486 which institutional support systems, such as childcare services and domestic outsourcing, enable
487 women's mobility (Cohen & Cohen, 2015). In contrast, Sri Lankan women are embedded within family

488 structures that demand continuous caregiving, making such detachment nearly impossible. Another
489 respondent elaborated on this situation:

490 *“They have a professional support system... caregivers, dog day care... husband and*
491 *wife are cooperative” (Res3)*

492 Here, freedom is not merely an individual attribute but rather a product of structural and cultural
493 support systems. This aligns with Kalisch and Cole’s (2023) argument that gender justice in tourism is
494 closely linked to broader socio-economic structures that enable or constrain women’s agency. At the
495 destination, this freedom becomes visibly performative:

496 *“Foreign women come with comfortable dresses... very relaxed and free to travel...*
497 *Our women have to run home quickly and attend to household chores” (Res4)*

498 Dress and bodily comportment become key markers of freedom. Foreign women’s relaxed demeanour
499 contrasts sharply with the hurried and cautious movements of local women. This aligns with Butler’s
500 (2000) notion of gender performativity, where identity is enacted through embodied practices.
501 Furthermore, the ability to enjoy leisure without guilt is emphasised:

502 *“They go to different hotels, try different food, and enjoy themselves—they do*
503 *everything much more freely and relaxed than our women” (Res9)*

504 This highlights an important aspect: while local women experience travel as a negotiated and often
505 stressful activity, foreign women are perceived as experiencing it purely as leisure. Such
506 representations reinforce the idea that leisure itself is unequally distributed, shaped by gender, class,
507 and geography (Ferguson, 2011). Participants frequently contrasted the absence of moral judgement
508 experienced by foreign women with the scrutiny directed toward local women. The local gaze thus
509 operates selectively, assigning different meanings to similar behaviours depending on women’s social
510 and cultural identities. Activities regarded as ordinary when performed by foreign women were often
511 interpreted as inappropriate when undertaken by local women.

512 Collectively, these findings indicate that freedom functions as a relational category linking selfness
513 and otherness. The characteristics attributed to foreign women gain meaning because they contrast with
514 participants’ own experiences of surveillance, collective responsibility, and restricted mobility
515 established in the previous theme.

516 **4.2.2 Superiority and Privilege**

517 Beyond freedom, foreign women are constructed as superior and privileged, a perception rooted in
518 economic power, education, exposure, and physical appearance. These attributes collectively form
519 what can be understood as touristic capital, enabling foreign women to navigate spaces with confidence
520 and authority. Rather than reflecting objective differences between groups, these perceptions illustrate
521 how relational hierarchies are constructed through the local gaze. Economic privilege is a dominant
522 factor:

523 *“They have so much money... they can turn any unfavourable situation into their*
524 *favour” (Res3)*

525 This reflects [how money shapes](#) travel experiences. Financial resources enable foreign women to
526 access safer accommodations, reliable transportation, professional and personalised services, thereby
527 reducing their vulnerability (Gentry, 2007). In contrast, local women's limited economic resources
528 restrict their choices and amplify risks. Another respondent highlighted the currency advantage:

529 *"Even middle-income foreigners appear quite wealthy here because of their stronger*
530 *currencies"* (Res8)

531 This illustrates how global economic inequalities are renegotiated within tourism spaces, where
532 currency differentials translate into differential experiences of mobility and comfort. Cultural and
533 educational capital further reinforce perceptions of superiority:

534 *"They know how to read maps, use smart technology better than us, and respond quickly*
535 *in emergencies"* (Res11)

536 This aligns with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital, where knowledge, skills, and
537 competencies enable individuals to navigate social environments effectively. [Perceptions of foreign](#)
538 [women's competence enhance their confidence and reduce](#) their perceived vulnerability. Physical and
539 psychological attributes are also emphasised:

540 *"Many foreign women seem stronger, both physically and mentally, compared to local*
541 *women"* (Res7)

542 Such perceptions contribute to a hierarchy of power relations in which Western women are constructed
543 as strong, assertive, and independent, while local women are seen as weak and dependent. This echoes
544 postcolonial critiques of tourism, where Western bodies are widely accepted, and local bodies are
545 marginalised (Tucker, 2007). Respondents also attributed foreign women's resilience to training and
546 exposure:

547 *"Sometimes they may even know different martial arts, so they don't seem to have much*
548 *fear"* (Res6)

549 This reflects the perception that foreign women are better equipped to manage risks, reinforcing their
550 image as empowered travellers. As Yang et al. (2018) suggest, empowerment in travel is closely linked
551 to women's ability to negotiate and manage risks.

552 Importantly, these findings do not suggest that foreign women universally experience greater freedom
553 or privilege. Rather, they reveal how Sri Lankan women construct images of foreign women through
554 the lens of their own lived experiences. The significance of **otherness**, therefore, lies not in describing
555 foreign women but in illuminating how participants negotiate identity, agency, and belonging within
556 gendered tourism spaces.

557 Collectively, the findings show that otherness is relationally constituted through selfness. The
558 perceived privilege of foreign women highlights the structural inequalities, moral surveillance, and
559 constrained mobility experienced by local women. In this way, the local gaze not only differentiates
560 between groups but also shapes women's self-understandings through comparison with socially valued
561 others.

562 4.2.3 Supportive Cultures

563 Another important dimension of otherness emerging from the findings is participants' perception that
564 foreign women benefit from more supportive socio-cultural environments. Participants frequently
565 associated foreign societies with greater gender equality, stronger institutional support, and broader
566 acceptance of women's independent mobility. These perceptions were constructed through
567 comparisons with participants' own experiences, illustrating how otherness is relationally produced
568 rather than objectively observed. This contrasts sharply with the protective and restrictive upbringing
569 of Sri Lankan women.

570 *"They give their children more independence around the age of 13, but in our society,*
571 *we don't usually allow that"* (Res2)

572 This highlights differences in socialisation practices, where Western cultures emphasise autonomy and
573 independence, while Sri Lankan culture prioritises protection and control. These differences shape
574 women's confidence, decision-making, and willingness to travel. Another respondent noted:

575 *"Their cultures change and adapt with globalisation, but our culture often resists and*
576 *criticises new ways"* (Res7)

577 This reflects a tension between tradition and modernity, where Sri Lankan society resists changes that
578 challenge established gender norms. In contrast, foreign cultures are perceived as more adaptable and
579 progressive. The absence of gendered burdens in foreign contexts is also emphasised:

580 *"They don't have a culture that places all the burdens on women's shoulders"* (Res7)

581 This perception reinforces the idea that gender inequality is culturally specific, positioning Sri Lankan
582 women as disadvantaged within a global hierarchy. However, it also risks oversimplifying foreign
583 contexts, where gender inequalities persist in different forms (Kalisch & Cole, 2023). While
584 participants often associated foreign women with greater autonomy and freedom, these perceptions
585 may overlook persistent gender inequalities in many Western societies. Importantly, these perceptions
586 contribute to the idealisation of foreign women, creating aspirational identities for local women while
587 simultaneously reinforcing feelings of inadequacy. The perceived existence of supportive cultures
588 therefore became a symbolic representation of alternative possibilities through which participants
589 evaluated their own lived realities.

590 4.2.4 Preferential Treatment, Hospitality, and the Commodification of Foreignness

591 Another critical aspect of otherness is the preferential treatment afforded to foreign female travellers
592 within tourism and hospitality settings. This reflects the intersection of economic incentives, cultural
593 fascination, and postcolonial legacies. Rather than viewing these experiences simply as acts of
594 kindness, participants interpreted them as evidence that foreignness itself had become socially valued
595 within the tourism environment.

596 *"Local tourists are not treated as well as foreign tourists. The hotels prioritise*
597 *foreigners"* (Res1)

598 This highlights institutionalised inequalities within tourism systems, where foreign tourists are
599 prioritised for their perceived economic value. Such practices reinforce the commodification of

foreignness, where certain bodies are valued more than others (Tucker, 2007). The local gaze therefore operates selectively, assigning greater legitimacy and value to foreign women while subjecting local women to closer scrutiny and moral evaluation. Respondents also acknowledged Sri Lanka's strong hospitality culture:

"Sri Lanka has excellent hospitality, but it's important to offer the same level of hospitality to local tourists as well" (Res11)

This suggests a paradox in which hospitality is celebrated as a national trait, yet remains unevenly distributed. Foreign women are positioned as "ideal guests," deserving of exceptional service, while local women are often neglected. Foreignness itself was perceived to possess symbolic and economic value, making international visitors desirable for their contributions to tourism and national development. In this sense, foreignness becomes commodified, as the identity of the foreign tourist acquires value beyond the person. The role of cultural curiosity is particularly significant:

"For many in our society, white skin carries a certain fascination, often leading to increased curiosity and attention" (Res6)

This reflects a postcolonial gaze in which Western bodies are prioritised and admired. Such fascination is rooted in historical power relations, where colonial legacies continue to shape perceptions of race and identity (Hollinshead, 1999). Another respondent noted:

"People are keen to talk with tourists, often out of curiosity about different cultures" (Res9)

While curiosity can foster positive interactions, it also contributes to unequal power dynamics, where foreign women are positioned as objects of interest and local women as ordinary or invisible. Moreover, financial motivations influence service provision:

"Foreign women seem to have more money, and they often give generous tips" (Res3)

This reinforces the economic logic underpinning preferential treatment, in which service providers prioritise customers perceived as more profitable.

Participants contrasted this preferential treatment with their own experiences of surveillance and restricted legitimacy. The commodification of foreignness therefore reinforced the marginalisation of local women, as hospitality extended to foreign women highlighted the comparatively limited recognition afforded to locals.

Collectively, these findings show that preferential treatment and the commodification of foreignness reinforce the relational construction of otherness. Through the local gaze, participants understood themselves in relation to foreign women, reproducing broader hierarchies of gender, belonging, and social legitimacy.

4.2.5 Otherness as a Relational Mirror of Selfness

The findings indicate that participants' perceptions of foreign women extended beyond admiration of their freedom, supportive cultures, and favourable treatment. Rather than existing as an isolated perception of difference, otherness functioned as a relational mirror through which participants

constructed and evaluated their own selfness. Participants frequently compared their own lives with those of foreign women, using these comparisons to make sense of the restrictions, responsibilities, and inequalities they experienced within Sri Lankan society. Consequently, otherness was not merely about recognising difference but about understanding themselves through that difference.

Many participants described foreign women as representing an alternative way of living that seemed unattainable within their own social and cultural environment. The confidence, independence, and mobility they associated with foreign women prompted reflection on their own constrained experiences. Rather than [resenting foreign women, participants often admired them while questioning why Sri Lankan women lacked similar freedoms.](#)

One participant reflected:

“When I see foreign women travelling alone, making their own decisions and enjoying life without anyone questioning them, I feel happy for them and realise how different our lives are. It makes me think about everything we have to sacrifice.” (Res8)

Importantly, otherness is not an isolated construct but is deeply intertwined with selfness. [Constructing](#) foreign women as free, superior, and privileged directly shapes how local women perceive themselves. This relational dynamic creates a symbolic hierarchy in which foreign women occupy a higher position, reinforcing local women’s sense of inferiority.

These reflections demonstrate that participants used foreign women’s experiences as a benchmark against which they assessed their own identities and opportunities. The local gaze therefore operated relationally, positioning foreign women as symbols of autonomy while simultaneously reinforcing local women’s awareness of their own social constraints. In this sense, otherness became a mechanism through which selfness was continually negotiated.

Importantly, these comparisons did not simply reinforce feelings of inferiority. For several participants, observing foreign women also generated aspirations for change and greater autonomy. The contrast encouraged them to reconsider traditional expectations and imagine alternative possibilities for themselves and future generations. Thus, otherness functioned simultaneously as a source of comparison, critique, and aspiration.

The admiration expressed by respondents is often accompanied by self-reflection:

“I felt that we, as local women, don’t have that kind of freedom, even within our own country” (Res5).

This quote highlights the contradiction that local women perceived themselves as less free in their own country than foreign women. Tourism mobility thus became a marker of privilege, reinforcing broader global inequalities (Cohen & Cohen, 2015).

Theoretically, these findings extend Urry's (1990) concept of the tourist gaze by showing that the gaze not only constructs tourists but also shapes local identities. They also expand Wassler and Kirillova's (2019) concept of the local gaze by demonstrating how it produces internalised hierarchies among local women.

Collectively, the findings show that otherness is constructed through perceived freedom, privilege, cultural support, and preferential treatment, positioning foreign women as ideal travellers while reinforcing [local women's constrained identities](#). Rather than opposing concepts, selfness and otherness are relationally co-constructed through the local gaze, with participants understanding their identities, agency, and place in tourism through continual comparison with foreign women.

5 Conclusions

This study examined Sri Lankan women's tourism experiences through the interconnected concepts of selfness, otherness, and the local gaze, addressing an important gap in Global South tourism scholarship. The findings demonstrate that women's tourism experiences are shaped through the interaction of internalised social norms and external social expectations, which together influence their mobility, agency, and participation. Rather than exercising unrestricted autonomy, women continually negotiate travel aspirations within gendered responsibilities, moral regulation, and societal expectations.

A key theoretical contribution of this study is to conceptualise the local gaze as the relational mechanism through which selfness and otherness are continuously co-produced within tourism. Rather than treating selfness as an internal identity and otherness as an externally imposed category, the findings demonstrate that women's understandings of themselves are constructed through ongoing comparisons with foreign women, whose perceived freedom, confidence, and social legitimacy illuminate the constraints that shape local women's mobility and agency. Thus, the study reconceptualises selfness and otherness as dynamic and relational processes, extending Urry's (1990) tourist gaze by shifting attention from how tourists view destinations to how local communities actively produce, negotiate, and reproduce gendered identities. By positioning the local gaze as a socially embedded process of recognition and differentiation, the study offers a new lens for understanding how gendered identities and unequal mobilities are constituted within postcolonial tourism contexts.

The study also contributes empirically by foregrounding the voices of Sri Lankan women, a perspective largely absent from tourism research. In doing so, it challenges Western-centric assumptions that equate tourism with individual freedom and empowerment, demonstrating instead that women's mobility is negotiated through intersecting cultural norms, collective responsibilities, postcolonial legacies, and unequal systems of social recognition. The findings further illustrate how we-mode cognition (Tuomela, 2006), the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990), and postcolonial identity structures collectively shape women's tourism experiences, offering a more contextually grounded understanding of gendered mobility in the Global South.

This study has several limitations. As a qualitative study based on a purposive and heterogeneous sample, the findings provide contextual insights rather than statistical generalisation. While shared themes emerged across participants, the diversity of age, marital status, occupation, and geographic location means the findings should not be interpreted as representing all Sri Lankan women's tourism experiences. Future research could explore specific social or cultural groups within Sri Lanka and undertake comparative studies involving both local and international women travellers to further examine the relational construction of selfness and otherness across different tourism contexts.

The findings have several practical implications for policymakers, destination managers, and tourism stakeholders. Increasing women's participation in domestic tourism requires addressing both structural and sociocultural barriers. Family-friendly tourism infrastructure, including childcare facilities at

major attractions and accommodation providers, would help reduce the caregiving constraints that limit women's mobility. Destination marketing and media campaigns should actively challenge traditional gender stereotypes by portraying Sri Lankan women as confident and independent travellers, thereby normalising women's leisure mobility. Tourism businesses should also promote equitable treatment of local and international visitors by reviewing practices that privilege foreign tourists and reinforce unequal perceptions of belonging. Finally, community awareness initiatives involving families, local leaders, and tourism stakeholders could help reshape social attitudes towards women's travel and encourage greater acceptance of leisure as a legitimate activity for women. Together, these measures would foster a more gender-inclusive and socially equitable tourism environment in Sri Lanka.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the corresponding author upon request.

Ethics statement

The study was conducted in accordance with local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author Contributions

HPAS Pathirana: Investigation, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Project administration, Conceptualisation, Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Visualisation.

Heike Schänzel: Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Conceptualisation.

S.R.S.D.K. Weerawansa: Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis, Validation, Methodology supervision, Visualisation.

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Figure 1: A Relational Model of the Gendered Local Gaze and the Construction of Selfness and Otherness

