

Between Violence and Everyday Resistance: An Intersectional Feminist Study of Women's Voices in Beirut and Cairo

by Nathalie Baba

Abstract: Violence against women is a major public health issue that causes severe physical and mental health consequences, including permanent injuries, depression, and suicide, affecting more than 35% of women worldwide (UN 2017; WHO 2021). In the post-Arab Spring era, the prevalence of sexual and physical violence against women in public spaces has prompted numerous international and national interventions. Yet, despite these efforts, only a small proportion of survivors access support services, report incidents to the police, or receive healthcare, legal, or social assistance. Research suggests that many international and humanitarian programs struggle to engage women survivors effectively, often due to limited cultural sensitivity and reductive representations of Middle Eastern societies. In response to these limitations, a range of grassroots and feminist initiatives have emerged to provide alternative spaces of support and advocacy. This study examines six local and transnational initiatives in Beirut and Cairo that use both online and offline platforms to amplify women's voices and make visible experiences of violence. Drawing on eighty-one narratives of violence collected through these platforms, as well as eleven semi-structured interviews with initiative founders, this paper explores the relationship between women's experiences of violence and their practices of resistance. More specifically, it examines how women resist in the face of intimate, structural, and political violence. This relationship is analyzed through a critical interdisciplinary framework informed by anthropology, transcultural psychology, critical sociology, and feminist studies. Our findings demonstrate how gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, migration status, and disability shape both experiences of violence and possibilities for resistance. An intersectional feminist perspective allows us to situate these practices along a continuum ranging from highly visible acts—such as public testimonies, political activism—to less visible forms of resistance, including storytelling, solidarity, social awareness, and silence. Importantly, our analysis also highlights how silence and subtle acts of defiance—such as refusal, non-compliance, and strategic disengagement—can function as meaningful forms of resistance, particularly among women whose opportunities for overt political action may be constrained.

Keywords: violence against women; resistance; agency; intersectionality; feminist activism; digital storytelling

Résumé : La violence à l'égard des femmes constitue un enjeu majeur de santé publique, entraînant des conséquences graves sur la santé physique (blessures permanentes) et mentale (dépression, suicide, etc.), et touchant plus de 35 % des femmes dans le monde (ONU, 2018 ; OMS, 2021). Dans le contexte post révolutionnaire arabe, la forte prévalence des violences sexuelles et physiques envers les femmes dans les espaces publics a donné lieu à de nombreuses interventions nationales et internationales visant à prévenir et à éliminer ces violences. Pourtant, malgré ces efforts, l'accès aux services de soutien demeure limité : seule une faible proportion des survivantes a recours aux services policiers, judiciaires, de santé ou aux services sociaux. Parmi les obstacles, plusieurs travaux montrent que les programmes internationaux et humanitaires peinent à répondre aux besoins des femmes concernées, notamment en raison d'un manque de sensibilité aux réalités locales et de représentations réductrices des femmes du monde arabe, souvent dépeintes comme des victimes passives et silencieuses, soumises à l'autorité religieuse et patriarcale. En réponse à ces limites, de nombreuses initiatives féministes de terrain, locales et transnationales, ont émergé afin de créer des espaces alternatifs de soutien, de solidarité et de mobilisation. Cette étude porte sur six initiatives implantées à Beyrouth et au Caire qui mobilisent des espaces en ligne et hors ligne afin de soutenir les femmes, d'amplifier leurs voix et de rendre visibles les violences qu'elles subissent. À partir de quatre-vingt-un récits de violence recueillis sur les

plateformes Web de ces initiatives, ainsi que de onze entretiens semi-dirigés réalisés auprès de leurs fondatrices, cet article explore les liens entre les expériences de violence des femmes et leurs pratiques de résistance. Plus précisément, il examine la manière dont celles-ci négocient et résistent aux violences intimes, structurelles et politiques dans différents contextes de leur vie. Cette articulation entre violence et résistance est analysée à partir d'un cadre critique interdisciplinaire mobilisant l'anthropologie, la psychologie transculturelle, la sociologie critique et les études féministes. Les résultats montrent que les expériences de violence et les trajectoires de résistance sont façonnées par l'intersection de rapports sociaux liés au genre, à la classe sociale, à l'ethnicité, à l'orientation sexuelle, au statut migratoire et à la situation de handicap. Une perspective féministe intersectionnelle permet ainsi de situer les pratiques de résistance sur un continuum allant des formes les plus visibles — telles que les témoignages publics, l'activisme politique et l'engagement collectif — aux formes plus discrètes, comme les récits de soi, les gestes de solidarité, les prises de conscience sociale, et le silence agentif. Enfin, notre analyse montre que le silence, tout comme certains actes subtils d'insubordination — notamment le refus, la désobéissance ou le retrait stratégique — peut constituer une forme significative de résistance, en particulier lorsque les possibilités de prise de parole et d'action politique sont limitées dans l'espace public.

Mots clés : violence à l'égard des femmes; résistance; agentivité; intersectionnalité; activisme féministe; récits de soi numériques

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Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century and into present times, women have played a pivotal role in national and anti-colonial struggles across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the broader Arab world. They helped shape the Arab revolutionary imagination not only through their massive presence in public spaces, but also through diverse forms of resistance and expression. Women have made their voices heard through literature, poetry, photography, film, painting, storytelling, theatre, graffiti, and slam poetry (Jasser et al. 2016; Mansour 2016; Cooke 2016; Hafez 2012).

Across Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Algeria, women's mobilizations have historically articulated a dual political discourse: the struggle for equal rights and full citizenship alongside demands for national liberation and anti-colonial independence (Dayan-Herzbrun 2016; Wahba 2016; Badran 2016).

The wave of popular uprisings in December 2010—commonly referred to as the Arab Spring—marked a significant turning point in this long history of mobilization. For women across the region—regardless of age, social class, religion, or political orientation—these uprisings opened new sociopolitical spaces of resistance. Within these spaces, women articulated demands for improved socio-economic conditions, greater rights, emancipation and autonomy from patriarchal authority, and the overthrow of authoritarian regimes (Guillot and Martinez 2016; Wahba 2016; Mehta 2014).

While the Arab Spring uprisings led to important political transformations—including the fall of several authoritarian regimes—they also contributed to the intensification of armed conflicts, gender-based violence and systemic oppression in the region (Guillot and Martinez 2016; Amar 2011; Booth and El Hussein 2014; Jasser et al. 2016;

Chékir 2014; Mansour 2016; Dayan-Herzbrun 2016; Hafez 2012). The complexities of democratic transition, the challenges of constitutional reform, and the resurgence of both state repression and religious fundamentalist movements have contributed to widespread insecurity and political instability, disproportionately affecting marginalized populations, particularly women and young girls (Hafez 2012; Kelly and Breslin 2010; Gheyntachi and Moghadam 2014; UNICEF 2021).

Nevertheless, the revolutionary moment also opened new discursive spaces that enabled women to speak out more freely. As Chékir (2014, 7) observes, the “Arab street,’ independent of any political movement, broke its silence.” This emancipatory moment fostered new forms of expression and critical reflections, often rooted in disillusionment with institutional and international politics (Cooke 2016).

Among the many initiatives that have emerged in the MENA and the Arab World, this article focuses on six local and transnational projects based in Beirut and Cairo that support women survivors of violence and make their experience visible. Drawing on nine months of fieldwork conducted in both cities, this research combines a qualitative analysis of eighty-one narratives of violence collected from two online platforms with eleven semi-structured interviews conducted with the founders of these initiatives. The central aim of this research is to examine the intersections between women’s experiences of violence and their practices of resistance, with particular attention to how women survivors resist and develop their agency in response to violence. This relationship is explored through an interdisciplinary framework combining anthropology, transcultural psychology, critical sociology, and feminist studies.

The article is structured in five sections. The first examines the limitations of international political interventions addressing violence against women, while highlighting the crucial role of grassroots feminist movements in promoting collective healing and social transformation in post-revolutionary societies. The second presents the research methodology and the researcher’s positionality. The third outlines the feminist analytical framework guiding the study of resistance practices. The fourth presents the findings, highlighting the diverse forms of resistance mobilized by the women in response to violence. Finally, the fifth section discusses these practices along a continuum—from visible acts, such as public testimonies and activism, to less visible or invisible forms, including silence, insubordination, artistic expression, solidarity, and community care.

Challenges of International Strategies in Addressing Violence Against Women in the Arab World

In the post-revolutionary context of the Arab World, the 2021 edition of a report by the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), *Situational Analysis of Women and Girls in the MENA and Arab States Region—A Decade Review 2010–2020*, provides an overview of the sociopolitical conditions affecting women and girls across the region. The report highlights several social gains achieved over the past decade, including increased visibility of women in several spheres of daily life, improved access to employment and education, and greater representation in political and legal arenas.

However, these advances coexist with persistent structural barriers that continue to limit women’s political participation and social equality. Key trends include: (1) a rise in gender-based violence in both private and public spaces; (2) women’s continued underrepresentation in political spheres; (3) unequal access to resources and decent employment, particularly for migrant, refugee, and undocumented women; and (4) a significant increase in poverty among women from working-class, urban, semi-urban, and rural backgrounds (Hafez 2012; Moghadam 2014; Amar 2011; UNICEF 2021).

Despite the development of numerous international conventions, resolutions, and programs aimed at preventing and addressing violence against women, particularly in post-conflict contexts—such as the creation of the WHO’s Women, Health, and Development Unit, and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325—the prevalence of violence against women remains high across the Arab world (UNICEF 2021). Several interrelated factors help explain the limited impact of these international frameworks.

1. At the national level, a persistent gap exists between legislative reforms and their effective implementation. As noted by the United Nations (UN) (2017,16), no country has fully aligned its legal system with the obligations of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) or developed coherent policies to operationalize existing legal frameworks. Egypt's 2014 sexual harassment law exemplifies this disconnect: despite its adoption, few concrete measures have been introduced to ensure its enforcement by state institutions (Abdelmonem 2015). This implementation gap is further compounded by the limited availability of accessible and adequately resourced support services for women survivors of violence.

2. In practice, only a small proportion of women who experience violence seek institutional assistance or report incidents to the police. In fact, the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (2008) reported that 97% of Egyptian and 87% of foreign women surveyed did not report sexual harassment to law enforcement. Similarly, UN data (2017) indicate that fewer than 40% of women survivors seek institutional support, and only 10% access services such as police, judicial, or healthcare institutions. These low rates of engagement are largely attributed to mistrust of institutions, insufficient training of services providers, and fears on the part of victims that they will be revictimized by police and health professionals.

3. Structural constraints further undermine effective responses, including chronic underfunding of prevention programs and inadequate training for healthcare workers and frontline service providers (UN 2017; WHO 2021; UNICEF 2021). Moreover, international strategies continue to prioritize security-oriented approaches and police intervention, an orientation strongly contested by grassroots feminist activists given the prevalence of police-perpetrated violence (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005; Amar 2011). In Egypt, for example, fear and mistrust of law enforcement deterred 34.6% of women from reporting sexual harassment (Booth and El Hussein 2014).

International policy frameworks have also been criticized for reproducing culturalist discourses that attribute violence to Arab-Muslim culture and traditions. Such narratives reinforce orientalist representations of Arab women as passive victims of inherently oppressive societies while obscuring structural factors and women's agency (Abu-Lughod 1990; Abu-Lughod 2002; Amar 2011). In addition, international funding has disproportionately favoured economic empowerment initiatives for women which, while valuable, often overlook the structural roots of violence and rely on top-down, professionalized approaches that provide limited support to survivors (Calvès 2009; Sokoloff and Dupont 2005).

In sum, while international and national policies have laid important groundwork, their effectiveness is consistently undermined by fragmented implementation, culturalist narratives, and weak alignment with women's lived realities. In response, numerous local women's movements have emerged across the Arab world, adopting a more participatory orientation and community-based approaches. For many of these movements, the Internet has become both a tool of resistance and a space of democratization and social emancipation for marginalized communities, enabling women to challenge traditional media and organize collective action (Najar 2013; Pratt 2020). Although women's internet use has increased steadily since the Arab Spring (ITU 2023, 8), relatively few studies have critically assessed the effectiveness or limitations of digital platforms in supporting women survivors.

Methodology

Speaking about others needs to be backed up by speaking with others. We will do this as long as we do ethnography (Fabian 2006,148).

This research is based on a qualitative analysis of eighty-one narratives of violence collected from two digital platforms (*Uprising of Women in the Arab World* and *Sawt al Niswa*), along with eleven semi-structured interviews conducted with the founders of six initiatives. Forty-five of the published narratives were written in Arabic and were translated into English in collaboration with a local translator. All interviews with initiative founders were conducted in English.

The interviews were carried out during nine months of fieldwork in Beirut and Cairo. This prolonged presence in the field enabled us to establish closer relationships and networks with informants and women activists in both cities. The fieldwork itself constituted a form of knowledge production as it involved not only a prolonged and systematic presence in the field, but also a mode of observation that was simultaneously “internal” and “external.” This dual positionally facilitated access to relational dynamics and implicit aspects of social action that are often difficult to capture through interviews alone (Paugam 2010; Paillé and Mucchielli 2016; Hine 2015).

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and ethnographical methodological framework, grounded in feminist epistemologies that are both *situated* and intersectional. Standpoint feminist theory underscores the importance of incorporating situated perspectives and subjective experiences into the production of knowledge, recognizing individuals as knowers and active agents of their own experiences and practices (Harding 1992; Haraway 2007; Clair 2016). Intersectional analysis further highlights the effects of intersecting power relations—related to gender, ethnicity, social class, colonialism, disability, age, sexuality, and more—on women’s experiences of violence and their resistance trajectories (Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 2016; Bilge 2009). This second model sheds light on the structural causes underlying women’s experiences of violence, as well as on the systemic factors that constrain survivors’ agency.

Researcher’s positionality

The feminist standpoint adopted in this research also requires reflexive engagement with the researcher’s own social position and its effects on both knowledge production and relationships in the field (Clair 2016; Harding 1991). Rejecting the possibility of researcher neutrality, Clair (2016) argues that feminist positioning constitutes a form of knowledge that demands ongoing reflection on fieldwork materials, interpretative processes and the researcher’s social and cultural assumptions shaping the analysis.

Awareness of the researcher’s own positionality made it possible to acknowledge potential power relations influencing both discourses and the production of meaning within the testimonies analyzed. This reflexive posture also facilitated the development of trust-based relationships with participants during the interviews. For instance, shared aspects of identity—particularly gender and cultural background, as I am a woman of Egyptian, Armenian, and Kurdish descent born in Montreal—appeared to foster openness when discussing experience of violence and resistance.

This study nonetheless has limitations. The use of English as a second language in interviews and translated narratives may have introduced cultural distance and affected meaning-making; conducting interviews in Arabic might have generated different insights. In addition, the researcher’s experiences as a visible minority in Canada differ from those of informants in Beirut and Cairo, as well as from women who shared their narratives online. Religion, for instance, appeared less central in interviews than in online narratives. These positional differences may have produced blind spots in interpreting intersectional experiences of violence and resistance across diverse groups of women.

Deconstructing Resistance: A Feminist Perspective

Agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms (Mahmood 2005, 15).

A review of the literature on violence against women reveals that relatively few studies have examined the practices and strategies of resistance deployed by Arab women who experience violence. Moreover, when such practices are addressed, they are often reduced to passivity or inaction, as described by Boy and Kulczycki (2008, 67), who argue that “victims often show passive acceptance of the abuse and are unlikely to attempt to change the situation.” As a result, Arab women are frequently represented in the literature as passive victims subjected to oppressive sociocultural norms (e.g. religion and patriarchy). In this body of literature, culture and religion are often mobilized as explanatory causes for violence against women, obscuring gendered social relations and the structural forms of violence shaping women’s diverse experiences, while simultaneously silencing their agency and resistance.

Numerous activists and scholars have criticized these approaches, arguing that they reflect a Western-centric and colonial logic in which women in non-Western societies are portrayed as mute (silent) victims subjected to religious and patriarchal authority (Abu-Lughod 1990; Abu-Lughod 2002; Bilge 2010; Mahmood 2005; Moghadam 2014).

According to these authors, such a perspective reinforces biases and binary discourses that associate agency and resistance with modernity, while linking inaction, apathy, and passivity in the face of violence with tradition and religion.

The critique echoes broader debates in the social sciences surrounding the veil and the culturalist assumptions embedded in certain feminist analyses, which oppose “oppressed” Arab women constrained by religion to “emancipated” white Western women. Feminist and decolonial scholarship has played a crucial role in dismantling this binary opposition historically constructed between vulnerability/passivity and agency/resistance, making visible the multiple arrangements, negotiations, and resistance practices deployed by Arab women in contexts of violence. Mahmood (2005, 6) underscores the importance of feminist scholarship in restoring and amplifying these historically marginalized voices. Similarly, Khamis and Mili (2018) argue that the invisibilization of Arab Women in the literature on violence has directly contributed to the erasure of their resistance practices, a process rooted in persistent culturalist biases and stereotypes applied to them.

The feminist and decolonial reappropriation of empowerment and resistance also constitutes a political response to the ways these concepts have been instrumentalized within public health and development policies. Such policies often equate agency with individual choice and economic autonomy (Calvès 2009; Jasser et al. 2016; Marteu 2011). In this vein, the UN (2017) emphasizes the importance of women’s economic empowerment as a primary protective factor against gender-based violence.

However, the literature on empowerment highlights that the concept has become diluted and is now the subject of significant debate within the social sciences. These debates are closely tied to the ways international organizations have promoted an individualistic and economic approach to violence prevention, prioritizing funding for institutionalized empowerment programs focused primarily on increasing women’s economic power. Feminist scholars have pointed out the limitations of such programs, arguing that they contribute to the depoliticization of empowerment, obscure the power relations sustaining violence against women, and tend to benefit primarily the least marginalized women.

In the following section, this article demonstrates that resistance and empowerment cannot be reduced solely to economic agency or to visible forms of emancipation in public spaces. By challenging the historically constructed binary between oppression or vulnerability and agency or resistance, this article seeks to recognize alternative and less visible forms of resistance and to advance a more inclusive and situated conceptualization of resistance than that offered in much of the existing literature on violence.

Results: Women’s Experiences and Practices of Resistance

Political action

Among the feminist practices of social engagement identified in this study, some participants prioritized political mobilization and collective action in public spaces as central forms of resistance to gender-based violence. These participants explicitly identified as “activists” and emphasized solidarity as the foundation of a transnational feminist movement:

“Feminism has always been radical. It’s a historical movement, something collective and poetic. The only power we really have is in building collective action through solidarity. I fully support any initiative that moves from the individual to the collective. I’m not comfortable with individual initiatives, because systemic issues haven’t been addressed” (Interview 10).

Other participants, however, expressed discomfort with the label “activist,” particularly in the Egyptian context, where it carries elitist connotations. Instead, they described themselves as feminists, and framed feminism as an intimate, relational practice rooted in everyday life rather than formal political mobilization. These participants often favoured artistic, indirect, or less visible forms of resistance: “Feminism is not only about public space; it is also about family and intimate choices. It is a social and personal choice, not only a political one” (Interview 8).

The analysis identifies four interrelated motivations shaping participants’ trajectories of resistance and the creation of feminist initiatives: (1) the pursuit of personal healing and social connection; (2) a sense of social responsibility; (3) the aspiration to democratize knowledge; and (4) a commitment to hope and continuity.

Participants’ political engagement was often rooted in personal experiences of gender-based violence and social injustice, including workplace discrimination, abusive relationships, sexual violence in public spaces, and gendered inequalities within the family. In several cases, exposure to broader political violence and marginalization also acted as catalysts for feminist engagement:

“Growing up amid injustice shaped my sense of rebellion. I was raised in a working-class neighbourhood marked by poverty, close to Palestinian refugee communities, where I witnessed daily hardship and discrimination. ... I still remember the fear, the anxiety, and the nights hiding from shelling. This reality is hard to escape” (Interview 1).

For many participants, anger emerged as a central affective force in both personal healing and collective mobilization. Activism and feminist engagement were often described as ways of transforming intimate suffering and anger into collective resistance. As one participant explained, “The revolution released individual and collective anger. ... Women who didn’t know each other before started speaking together. We realized we were all suffocating from the same anger” (Interview 2).

The revolutionary moment was widely described as formative, fostering feminist consciousness, solidarity, and political engagement. One participant recalled: “In 2011, my political and feminist consciousness started to form.... It made me aware of the risks of being a woman and an activist in Egypt, but it also pushed me to engage in resisting that reality” (Interview 7).

For many, this period was experienced as a generative period characterized by political effervescence, collective hope, and a sense of shared destiny: “... We are all the children of the revolution” (Interview 7).

Finally, some participants emphasized that their engagement and well-being were inseparable from their responsibility toward others and future generations of women: “How could I be well if others were suffering? I never felt this was a choice ... I wanted to feel better, and I wanted others to feel better too” (Interview 1).

Storytelling and the act of writing

I will write my story here, because I am being systematically silenced (Narrative SAN-11).

For survivors, online storytelling emerged as a powerful form of resistance. Writing enabled women to break silence, reclaim their narratives, assert agency over their lives, and challenge oppressive social structures. Digital platforms allowed women not only to share their personal experiences but also to build solidarity with others who had experienced similar forms of violence.

Many narratives emphasized writing as a means of emotional release, self-reconciliation, and resistance: “I used poetry to describe my anger online and, at the same time, to resist” (Narrative SAN-1). “I decided to face my fears and stand up to harassment online, to reconcile with myself. I felt confident again” (Narrative UP-58).

Sharing stories was often described as a transformative process, allowing women to move from invisibility to recognition and from victimhood to survivorship: “When you share your story, you are no longer a victim hidden in the closet, you’re not a taboo, nor a secret, nor a scandal. You become a storyteller—a proactive speaker taking action by telling your story” (Interview 11).

For many users, engagement with these platforms through storytelling also contributed to emotional regulation, particularly regarding anger and guilt, and has enabled them to confront trauma, process grief, and rebuild trust. Some participants reported concrete impacts, such as leaving abusive relationships, recognizing patterns of violence, or engaging in public advocacy.

Building community and solidarity

For the majority of women, digital platforms fostered strong forms of solidarity among women regardless of region, religion, sexual orientation, or social class. Participants emphasized the emotional and political importance of collective belonging: “The Internet is a space to tell your story and to bring people together” (Interview 3).

Belonging to a community of shared experience generated validation, renewed strength, and reduced feelings of isolation: “... When you know you’re not alone, you feel less hopeless and have more energy to fight back. The circle of sharing helps to feel heard and supported” (Interview 6).

Many survivors expressed a desire to support other women with similar experiences. This solidarity often took the form of encouraging others to speak out and resist gender-based violence: “I feel a sense of betrayal if I stop writing, but then I push myself to write—as long as there are women out there who suffer from similar abuse, I will keep writing” (Narrative SAN-7).

The analysis reveals a common pattern: many narratives shifted from an individual “I” to a collective “we,” reflecting both transnational and transgenerational solidarities and a shared commitment to making silenced voices visible and keeping alive the memory of those who have suffered.

Social awareness

Many women survivors emphasized the development of a social and political awareness through their participation in digital platforms. This awareness often shifted from an initial sense of individual ignorance to a structural understanding of gender-based violence. Exposure to other survivors’ testimonies often prompted many women to reinterpret their own experiences through a structural and feminist lens: “I am not sharing my story because it shocked me. I was moved because it made me realize how ignorant I had been before ...” (Narrative UP-4).

As another participant noted, this shift profoundly altered her perception of society: “My innocent perspective toward society changed in an instant ...” (Narrative UP-2).

This process highlights the transformative potential of online spaces—not only as sites of disclosure, but also as arenas for feminist consciousness, and critical reflection: “I don’t think there are actual changes in my everyday life. I think the changes are in how I perceive the public sphere and the city—and how I understand my experience” (Narrative UP-7).

Growing social awareness also involves a critical reassessment of dominant gender norms associating femininity with obedience, weakness, and silence. As one woman explained: “My mode of resistance was my conviction that being a woman must not be conflated with being weak ... and the realization that being a woman is totally healthy ... normal does not exist, it never did so I stopped wishing for everything to go back to being ‘normal’” (Narrative SAN-2).

By collectively sharing their stories, these women challenged internalized guilt and reassigned responsibility to oppressive social structures: “We must not bear the blame. Blame must be placed on our society” (Narrative UP-40). “Societal norms must not be given the right to silence women’s rights ... Women must speak up against all sorts of abuse” (Narrative UP-53).

This emerging consciousness was also accompanied by a collective hope for more equitable and safer societies for women.

Agentive silence

I decided not to talk, I don’t want to look like a victim. I don’t want to be anyone’s victim (Narrative UP-21).

Finally, the analysis reveals that some women deliberately choose silence as a form of resistance—either by withholding their voice, refusing to speak publicly, or declining to respond altogether. This silence often takes the form of defiance, or insubordination toward normative expectations, such as refusing to testify or undergo harmful medical procedures that could compromise their physical and mental health.

For many women, silence emerged as an agentive strategy to reclaim power and regain control over their personal narrative of violence. This choice was often motivated by a desire to avoid revictimization, retraumatization, and institutional violence. Refusing to testify, seek medical treatment, or engage with judicial systems was described as an act of self-protection and resistance: “At that time, I preferred to keep quiet ... because it is useless to talk in front of the justice system ... If my abaya, the society, and the Saudi Airline cannot protect me, then who will? I won’t be talking to any of them” (Narrative SAN-11).

In other cases, silence functioned as a protective strategy to survive shame, guilt, revictimization, and dishonour, while also shielding families from blame and social harm: “Blame would’ve been the response and so I refrained from reporting or even telling my parents” (Narrative UP-38). “I preferred to remain silent to avoid a scandal and protect my mother and me” (Narrative UP-42).

Acts of refusal and disobedience—toward family, medical institutions, or legal authorities—were also described as meaningful forms of resistance that challenge dominant gender norms and institutional power. Testimonies included women resisting both familial pressure and invasive medical intervention, unwanted psychiatric treatment, or expectations of docility and submission, even in contexts of chronic abuse and intersectional violence.

Finally, silence was sometimes mobilized as a collective and political strategy to protect fellow community members. One participant explained that women working with Palestinian communities in Lebanon often chose not to report abuse in order to protect already stigmatized groups from further legal and police violence rooted in racialized stereotypes: When I was working with Palestinian women in Lebanon, all of them kept silence about their abuse because they did not want Palestinian men to be perceived as perpetrators, even though some of them were (Interview 10).

Discussion

Voices of silence

Silence can take many forms and carries diverse meanings in women’s experiences of violence. Findings show that silence may emerge from trauma, functioning as an adaptive and protective response to violence and manifesting as the suppression or paralysis of speech. Silence can also be shaped by gender norms that condition women to remain quiet through internalized oppression, domination, or exclusionary discourses. Yet silence can also function as a subversive mode of expression, capable of disrupting and redefining dominant gendered norms. In this sense, silence may operate as a powerful counter-discourse and a form of resistance to violence.

The findings indicate that choosing not to speak, refusing to respond, rejecting medical care, lying, or disobeying within familial or institutional settings can serve as strategies to protect women from social and familial revictimization associated with dishonour, while simultaneously resisting violent acts or discourses. By inverting expected social roles, these gestures of refusal and insubordination become means for women survivors to express anger and indignation in the face of violence.

Women may also resist by remaining silent in public while cultivating solidarity in private spheres, refusing to engage with untrustworthy institutions, or withdrawing from systems that reproduce harm. In these contexts, silence is not merely strategic or a deliberate practice but becomes a space for reflection, solidarity, and vulnerability. Through this silence, they connect with other women's experiences and begin to emerge from the isolation of their trauma. These relational spaces often catalyze critical awareness of power relations and enable women to reconnect with others' experiences, gradually reclaiming agency and narrative control.

Following this logic, such silences should not be read as signs of submission but rather as expressions of agency. This perspective highlights that women do not always resist through visible or vocal protest, public engagement, or the verbal disclosure of trauma. As Mahmood (2005) argues in *Politics of Piety*, agency does not necessarily align with liberal ideals of emancipation or vocal defiance but must be understood within specific cultural and structural conditions in which women live and resist. Similarly, Spivak (1988) cautions against the assumption that "the subaltern cannot speak" unless they adopt Western modes of articulation. Spivak emphasizes that the demand for speech itself may reproduce epistemic violence, and that silence—when chosen—can itself be a mode of political or ethical subjectivity.

These multiple voices of resistance challenge assumptions that equate silence with powerlessness, trauma, apathy, or inaction. As feminist and postcolonial scholars emphasize, silence may function as a meaningful form of agency, particularly in contexts where visible or vocal resistance may be dangerous, ineffective, or culturally unintelligible (Butler 2016; Brown 2005; Bourgault 2015; Paradis-Deschênes 2021).

Voices of resistance: a continuum from visible to invisible

Acts of resistance emerge from distinct individual trajectories shaped by specific social, cultural, and political contexts. As demonstrated in this article, resistance can take as many forms as there are individuals, ranging from visible forms, such as public and visible testimonies, political activism, and the creation of online and offline initiatives, to less visible and everyday practices, including anonymous storytelling, solidarity, social awareness, agentive silence and gestures of refusal.

James C. Scott's concept of everyday resistance highlights the indirect and daily forms of resistance through which subordinate individuals cope, navigate, and contest domination without overt confrontation (Scott 1990). In a similar vein, Asef Bayat develops the notion of a feminism of everyday life, emphasizing how ordinary daily practices of life—such as working, playing sports or singing—can gradually reshape power relations without necessarily taking the form of explicit political claims or deliberate collective protest. These practices contribute to make oneself heard, seen, and felt through what Bayat calls "the power of their presence" (Bayat 2010: 98).

From this perspective, resistance practices can take different forms, ranging from visible political mobilization in the public sphere to more subtle, indirect, and everyday expressions such as poetry, testimony, oral history, storytelling, humour, and rumours. Building on the concept of everyday resistance, this approach captures how women living under conditions of social oppression resist and challenge gendered and patriarchal norms without overt transgression. These practices extend beyond direct and visible acts, encompassing subtler "strategies of play, circumvention, and negotiation" shaped by networks of domination and in tension with structural and internalized constraints, including family structures, patriarchy, and market dynamics (Dayan-Herzbrun 2016; Kandiyoti 2005).

Ethnographic studies by Lila Abu-Lughod (1990; 2002) and Saba Mahmood (2005) illustrate how women's everyday resistance—through religious devotion, poetry, modest dress, collective activities, or specific social practices—reveals hidden power relations that sustain subordination and violence (e.g., honour codes, Islamic laws, male domination, colonialism). From this perspective, power and resistance are understood as deeply intertwined: systems of domination not only produce compliance but also generate micro-political acts of defiance. As Foucault (1976, 125-126) famously notes, “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather because of this, resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.”

The concept of a continuum highlights what feminist and decolonial scholars emphasize: resistance is not limited to public or vocal acts of social emancipation, which often require women to speak out or expose themselves and thereby risk their safety. Rather, resistance varies from individual to individual depending on their social contexts and the resources available to them (Butler 2016; Brown 2005). Importantly, the notion of a continuum affirms that a lack of visibility—whether online or offline—does not imply an absence of resistance, nor does it indicate passivity or submission. By conceptualizing resistance along a continuum, alternative practices that are often marginalized or excluded from mainstream social science literature—such as gestures of vulnerability, solidarity, refusal, or silence—can be recognized as meaningful expressions of agency.

Intersectionality and resistance

Findings also indicate that trajectories of resistance are shaped by women's social positioning. In fact, the creators of local initiatives generally benefit from relative social and class privileges and certain forms of social protection (such as financial resources, higher education, and social support), which enable more visible forms of public mobilization. Despite persistent exposure to gender-based violence, particularly in Egypt, these resources appear to facilitate collective action and public denunciation.

Disparities in trajectories and modes of resistance (visible vs. everyday) among the women in this study reflect the intersectionality of violence. While some women denounce violence publicly by creating a movement for survivors, or share testimonies online, others resist through less visible strategies. As Scott (1990) notes, marginalized individuals often rely on everyday resistance strategies to avoid violent retaliation or life-threatening consequences in public spaces. These findings align with research on cyberactivism and the use of online spaces, showing that marginalized populations often rely on the Web anonymously when they cannot speak or share testimonies openly in public, particularly under conditions of political repression. This is especially notable among young women and those experiencing violence, who use these spaces to maintain anonymity, safety, and protection (Radsch & Khamis 2013; Khamis & Mili 2018; Stephan 2013).

In this context, the absence of voices and narratives from some women on online platforms (e.g. women situated at the intersection of multiple forms of social oppression) does not necessarily reflect a lack of resistance, but rather reflects the complex effects of intersectional violence. The lack of visibility and voice of these women in digital spaces may result from the limited inclusivity of the local initiatives studied, as well as from barriers to access for the most marginalized women.

Overall, these findings reinforce the idea that resistance operates along a continuum, ranging from visible to invisible forms. This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of resistance beyond Western-centric models of voice and visibility. Rather than framing these women solely as victims, this study highlights how diverse choices—whether to resist publicly through political action, speak out, remain silent, or act discreetly—reveal complex forms of agency shaped by structural, cultural, and political conditions. Future research and action research should further explore everyday and less visible strategies of resistance that go beyond speech-based emancipation, to better understand how marginalized women negotiate violence, express dissent, and sustain forms of collective survival.

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