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THE TYRANNY OF DRESS CODES

**WOMEN'S NARRATIVES OF VIOLENCE
AND RESISTANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST
AND NORTH AFRICA**

FARAH KOBASSY

FEMINIST ACTIVIST AND INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER



OXFAM

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Dress codes: A set of rules regarding what clothing groups of people (men and women) must wear. Dress codes are created out of social perceptions and norms, and vary based on purpose, circumstances and occasions as well as gender, age, class, social status and other intersectional variation.

Gender: Gender can be understood as the social and cultural construction of norms and behaviours attributed to people differently on the basis of their sex assigned at birth – the societal roles and differences that are presented under the terms ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’. Gender is thus anchored in society as a system of opposing dualities. It is presented in terms such as ‘men’s leadership’ versus ‘women’s submissiveness’, ‘men are rational’ versus ‘women are emotional’, and ‘men are strong’ versus ‘women are weak’.

Gender-conforming people: People whose gender identity matches the sex assigned to them at birth.

Queer: An umbrella term for ‘non-conforming’ sexualities and gender identities, including people whose sense of gender identity does not correlate with the sex they were assigned with at birth

Social norms: The actions and behaviours considered ‘normal’ and acceptable in society, and which are therefore rewarded and expected to be adhered to by all people. Conversely, actions and behaviours that do not fit with these expectations are considered ‘abnormal’ and wrong, causing individuals who transgress the norms to be marginalized and condemned by society.

Trans woman: Transgender, or ‘trans’, is an umbrella term for people who have been assigned a gender and sexual identity at birth that is incompatible with the gender they identify with. On this basis, a trans woman is a woman who was registered as a male at birth and referred to as a male by society, which is inconsistent with her identity as a female.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Based on in-depth interviews with 60 women from six countries in the Middle East and North Africa – Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt and Tunisia – this research explores the prevailing social norms surrounding concepts of decency, modesty and respect, which are used to control and regulate women's clothing and appearance.

The study found that the extent to which society deems women worthy of safety and security largely depends on their adherence to social norms on clothing, or dress codes.

- Women who do not abide by what is considered decent or modest may lose their 'parental protection'. They are often perceived as deserving of punishment and discipline. The decency/modesty standard is a gendered social norm that women are raised with and obliged to adhere to from childhood. Men are not expected to follow the same standard.

Though not all women experience violence to the same extent, the limitations imposed by social norms regarding clothing, and violence arising from these, was experienced by all of the women who participated in this research.

- All 60 women, without exception, agreed that they had been subjected to one or more forms of violence because of what was portrayed as their failure to comply with dress codes.

Often, the institutions that women are expected to turn to for protection either directly perpetrated violence, or tolerated and justified it. This reveals that the problem is structural, rather than emergent or exceptional:

- Participants indicated that their families' responsibility was primarily to police their appearance and enforce dress codes, and to discipline them if they stray from what is considered respectful.
- Most participants viewed institutional and legal structures with diffidence, and expressed reluctance to report incidents of violence to the authorities.
- Social norms around decency and what is considered a dignified appearance limit the women's ability to participate effectively in society and to navigate public spaces freely and safely.
- The dominant religious discourse contributes to upholding patriarchal values, especially regarding women's clothing, and can result in violence against women.

The women were exposed to microaggressions and explicit violence due to preconceived notions about acceptable and unacceptable clothing.

- The cumulative effects of microaggressions place women in an almost constant state of self-monitoring and hyper-vigilance, limiting their ability to participate fully in public life.
- Most forms of explicit violence perpetrated on the pretext of dress code transgressions were accompanied by an attempt to forcibly impose the veil on women as a means of disciplining them.
- Younger women were the most exposed to explicit violence, as most of them were not independent, lacked economic resources, and lived with their families or near their extended families.

The research assessed the impacts of class, age and gender identity on women's different experiences of violence.

- Class and better economic circumstances played a role, as women's ability to own a private car or pay the fare for on-demand transportation reduced the likelihood of them being harassed on the street, for example. It also increased their ability to be relatively free from societal censorship and gave them more leeway to wear clothing of their choice.

- Gender-conforming women in 'class-protected' areas, who do not have to travel on foot or who are not dependent on public transport, were less likely to be exposed to daily violence than their counterparts who live in poorer neighbourhoods, have non-conforming gender identities and are more financially restricted.

The participants' stories illustrate the heavy psychological and economic costs of violence against women in relation to dress codes.

- Some women avoided public places and carefully considered their clothing and shoes, given the potential need to escape violence on the street. The threat of danger dissuaded the majority of participants from using public transport.
- Women's ability to join the labour market or do the work of their choice was constrained by dress codes. Some participants reported facing discrimination in the workplace due to judgements about their clothing and appearance. Participants also indicated that non-compliance with dress codes could lead to them being deprived of education (or threatened with this), limiting their economic prospects.

The research concluded by highlighting women's daily acts of resistance to the restrictions.

- The women resisted by wearing what they like in secret, away from their family, neighbours and wider society.
- Daily resistance also included women tolerating social norms around clothing in exchange for other freedoms, such as education, as part of their strategy of 'negotiating with the patriarchy'.
- Women built solidarity by surrounding themselves with all-female networks, and anonymously sharing their experiences of living with such limitations on social media. This sense of unity is another act of resistance.

1. INTRODUCTION

As one of the most prominent issues raised by feminist movements globally, gender-based violence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has moved from the margins to the centre of public debate and political and legal conflict, especially post-2011. In 2011, uprisings sprang up across the MENA region, upending priorities, albeit temporarily, pushing broader justice issues to the fore and asking: 'What type of society do we want?' These uprisings constituted a defining political moment for feminist movements in the region to grow, and to bring gender justice issues in general, and violence against women in particular, to the table.

One out of every three women in the MENA region has been subjected to violence (UN Women, 2019), including sexual violence, whether in the public or private sphere, perpetrated by official or unofficial actors, and with the complicity of society and the state apparatus. No single factor can be blamed for the prevalence of this violence. However, the literature shows that one of the main factors underlying violence against women and girls – and attempts to justify it – is predominant, patriarchal-imposed social norms, which seek to reinforce gender inequality in various contexts. These norms dictate the behaviours expected of individuals and groups; they determine what is socially acceptable and, critically, what is not. Individuals who adhere to social norms are accepted and rewarded by their societies, while those who transgress them face stigma, ostracism and violence – especially if they are women.

Through interviews with 60 women from six countries in the Middle East and North Africa (Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt and Tunisia), this study seeks to understand how prevailing social norms around clothing contribute to and perpetuate violence against women and girls. Through analysing concepts of decency, modesty and respect, and how they are used to control women's dress codes and appearance, the research investigates the normalization of violence as a means of disciplining women and girls. Finally, themes of women's everyday resistance, agency, bodily autonomy and solidarity provide a wider context for the study.

This documentation of women's daily lives aims to reach as many women as possible, especially those who suffer violence in isolation and silence. This is the main motive behind the publication of this study initially in Arabic. It shares the ambitions of Samira, a researcher from Egypt, who said:

'I wish for something very simple. To have a voice that is able to reach and resonate with women who, at moments, feel as though they are crazy and to remind them that they are not, to remind them that they have the right to choose whether to dress or undress. I hope they hear this voice and have access to it because sometimes it is difficult to reach someone. To know that this voice is by your side to affirm that what you think is right. This is your body – and that is alright. Do not allow anyone to make you feel otherwise. In the end, I personally do not want anyone to tell me how to dress or how to undress. I want a chance to live my own journey.' (Samira, 31, researcher, Egypt)

Please note, in this paper the term 'women' includes transgender women. To meaningfully discuss violence against women, we must include all gender identities and take an intersectional approach in order to understand how gender-based violence intersects with social class, age, gender and sexual identity, and economic, political and social conditions. These factors interact to shape women's individual and collective experiences of violence and resistance.

2.METHODOLOGY

2.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Since the beginning of this study, as a researcher and feminist from the Middle East, an urgent question haunted me: How do we navigate an issue as politically charged as violence against women and its link to women's clothing, without falling into the many traps? Several competing political agendas exist when it comes to women's clothing. According to these, what women wear is not a matter of choice, agency or personal right. So how can we discuss women's right to dress as they wish without this being understood as a reference, or an obligatory path to, women's liberation? How do we discuss women's right to wear or take off the veil without reinforcing a binary position in favour of those who want to force women to wear it or those who want to force women to take it off?

These questions can't be addressed without touching on political and theoretical problems. Women's issues, especially violence and the veil, have historically been associated with a discourse on orientalism and with colonial wars in Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, were carried out on the pretext of women's liberation. Nevertheless, issues surrounding women's dress codes in MENA are linked to a culture based on social norms and authoritarian structures that support violence against women. Ignoring women's issues altogether to avoid wading into discussions on colonial wars and Islamophobia means being complicit with the prevailing patriarchal structures, allowing violence against women to be tolerated and remain rampant. At the same time, it is not possible to deal with these issues without recognizing and challenging how they are frequently used as a means to support racism and sectarianism.

However, despite the complexities, questions and reflections on culture, identity and freedom of the body can be explored without empathizing or identifying with the racist, orientalist, colonial or other discourses and policies that claim 'authenticity' in patriarchal hegemony. I believe in our capability as women to come up with positions and analyses that reflect the complex realities, away from the discourse of contradictory binaries. I therefore trusted the research process and its use of a feminist lens, which takes women's narratives and lived experiences as a basis for understanding and analysis.

The research examines the following questions: How do social norms and constructs that dictate women's clothing, such as ideas of modesty or decency, contribute to and perpetuate violence against women? What forms of violence do women face because of their dress choices? What are the sources of this violence, and how do women view its causes? What are the effects of this violence on their lives? Finally, what strategies do women adopt to deal with and resist this violence?

2.2 NARRATIVES AS A METHODOLOGY FOR RESEARCH AND TOOL FOR CHANGE

The research methodology was based on women's in-depth stories or 'narratives'. These constitute an important documentation of women's daily experiences of violence based on their appearance and the dress codes imposed on them. They expose the gender discrimination and misogyny that is rampant inside homes, on the streets, and in workplaces and institutions. In this research, participants are not just storytellers; they are interlocutors who contribute to theorizing and the analysis, deconstruction and production of knowledge. The research is a direct product of group efforts, not an individual one. It was a mutual learning experience between the researcher and the participants. Questions were discussed, not merely answered. Conversations were held and discussions on violence were collaborative.

The study also proved to be a therapeutic tool, by enabling women to share the pain of our personal and collective experiences of violence. It was a safe space to speak honestly and relate feelings about those experiences by building an atmosphere of trust. After the interviews, some of the women shared their gratitude for allowing them to be heard in a way that had not previously been accessible to them.

Personal narratives can also be a tool for change. They challenge the characterization of women as weak and alienated beings, and the long history of attempts to delegitimize our discourse. Through narration, gender roles are inverted and women show themselves to be 'subjects' rather than the 'objects' they have long been considered. As researcher Zeina Zaatari (2021) says: 'Resistance is shaped by women's ability to benefit from storytelling as a means to reverse positions of power, and to undermine prevailing patriarchal structures and practices, by disrupting the imagination and logic that supports them. Storytelling is an inherited act among women. They are the main storytellers.'

At the same time, Zaatari (2021) wonders, 'what stories should we tell?' She invokes the concept of 'counter-narratives', or stories that contradict the narrative of the dominant majority that enable and justify racist or misogynistic actions against gender-conforming and non-conforming women. Counter-narratives, according to Zaatari, are a way of telling the stories of women whose experiences are not often shared, and using them as a tool to expose, analyse and challenge the dominant narrative. She argues that: 'counter-narratives should not only respond to hegemonic narratives because that still contributes to their hegemony. They should go further, to speak of the transcendental possibilities of living in oppressive spaces such as sexist and exclusive public spaces that single out women and gender non-conforming people.'

Diverse narratives that uncover women's experiences of violence deconstruct patriarchal ideas, systems and norms that try to perpetuate stereotypical images of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' victims, whereby society judges the extent to which women deserve safety and security based on how much they adhere to dress codes. This division between deserving and undeserving victims nurtures patriarchal perceptions of women. Hence, it is of utmost importance to tell women's own stories, in all their diversity, and in a way that does not reinforce the ideology of an oppressive regime. These stories must be told fully, to avoid contributing to a culture that conceals, silences and selects what women share, either through fear or in order to please patriarchal society. In telling their stories, women confirm their agency.

2.3 SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

The research is based on in-depth and semi-structured interviews that allowed interviewees to share the complexities of their lives and to highlight the diversity of their contexts. Interview questions enabled participants to talk about their experiences in depth, and to identify and prioritize what they wanted to focus on. The interviews were conducted between January and February 2022, using various online tools, which participants selected according to personal preference and to ensure safety, security and privacy. Interviews were recorded, following verbal consent from the participants. The audio recordings were then transcribed, anonymized and deleted to ensure participants' safety and privacy. All names given in the text are pseudonyms. In the spirit of the collective development of feminist narratives about violence and resistance, participants were invited to discuss the preliminary findings and themes of the research in two group discussion sessions, held in March and April 2022. Their observations and views were included in the final text.

Participants were chosen using the snowball sampling technique. The author's regional network of feminist activists provided key entry points in the countries covered by the research and facilitated access to a wide range of women during a very limited period. The aim was to try to reach women whose voices are not usually heard or adequately represented. This had varying degrees of success, as the online medium by which the research was conducted constituted a barrier for women who may not have an internet connection, have no knowledge of how to surf digital platforms, or do not enjoy the privacy and freedom to share their experiences.

The participants in the research have different national, social, cultural, religious, class, ethnic and political backgrounds. Some of them are students, and others are recent graduates. Some are

researchers and others are activists. Participants include journalists, lawyers, academics, teachers and NGO workers. The interviews included main breadwinners for their families and others who are unemployed. Among the women are those who live with their families and some who are independent and live alone. There were married women among the participants, there were also divorced, and some of them were single and never married. Participants were also a mix of rural and urban areas.

The women also come from a wide range of environments. Some are from conservative societies and families, as they describe them, while others are from more open and mixed environments. Some define themselves as non-religious, some as non-practicing believers, and others as practising believers. The majority of women interviewed were gender-conforming, while some identified as queer trans women.

3. VIOLENCE RELATED TO DRESS CODES: NOT A TRIVIAL ISSUE

‘Some people tend to trivialize the problem of dress codes. But personally, I believe a woman cannot be expected to participate at a national level when she is unable to choose what she wishes to wear in her own home.’ (Hiyam, 30, human rights defender, Lebanon)

Some people see violence related to dress codes as trivial compared to other forms of violence women are subjected to. Yet participants in the study unanimously emphasized the centrality of this issue in their lives, despite their very different circumstances. As one interviewee put it, ‘Aren’t all women’s issues “trivial” according to the patriarchal system?’

While the women didn’t all experience violence to the same extent, their narratives reveal a large-scale problem which concerned them all, regardless of social class or gender identity, and whether or not they were veiled.

Choice of dress is viewed by many as a private matter and a way to express identity and personality. Yet for many women, decisions on clothing are far from private, as shown by the reactions they have experienced to their own and other women’s clothing choices since childhood. Unsolicited opinions and comments from relatives, neighbours, co-workers and even passers-by are loaded with implications around values, standards and customs. These have well-established historical and cultural roots reflecting society’s overt and covert view of women. The violence inflicted as a result of these social norms is common. This is why women’s choice of clothing cannot be considered a marginal issue.

Selecting what to wear is daily, routine, repetitive and habitual. This makes the violence associated with it daily, routine, repetitive and habitual too. As a result, the violence may not seem exceptional or noteworthy. This is what makes it dangerous. It also makes examining it a necessity, since revealing the status quo is necessary to challenge and confront it, and, finally, to change it.

3.1 IMPACT OF DRESS CODES ON WOMEN’S OWNERSHIP OF THEIR BODIES

Participants explained how dress codes have harmful consequences in several aspects of their lives. The extent to which they adhere to norms around clothing affects everyday decisions, including where they can go, what transportation they can take, what business they can conduct, what studies they can pursue, where they can live, what partners they can choose, and much more. *It was clear throughout the study that men, both relatives and strangers, took it as their responsibility to supervise the women’s behaviours and control their clothing. As such, they acted as unofficial moral police and guardians of the patriarchal system.* The findings also showed that a woman who exposes certain parts of her body was seen as ‘invalid’ or was objectified, as if through her choice of clothing she had announced that men are welcome to stare at her and that she is sexually available. Layan in Jordan said:

‘There is a permanent violation of us women. Men believe they have the right to control our bodies and make choices for us, choices that are supposed to be ours. Our body parts are not called by their names; instead, they are called “the taboo”. We are made to feel ashamed of

our bodies. In a patriarchal society, we are instruments of reproduction, obedience and service. Even in the simplest of scenarios, when a woman defends her right to choose, people will say “No one can discipline her. She is aberrant, and her family did not raise her well.” (Layan, 34, feminist activist, Jordan)

Women feel they have no agency or ownership over their bodies, beginning in childhood. Shaimaa, a schoolteacher from Egypt, spoke about the restrictions regarding girls’ bodies as they approach puberty, giving the example of her daughter’s gymnastics class:

‘I noticed that some of my daughter’s classmates’ parents, as soon as their daughters were older than 10, would stop them from playing sports on the pretext that “Their bodies have grown!” After years of hard work and a lot of effort from girls put into practising this sport, parents simply give it all up because of restrictions on clothing that they want to impose on girls.’ (Shaimaa, 32, teacher, Egypt)

This reveals how the imposition of dress codes is not related to protecting women from violence, despite what is often claimed. It is primarily about controlling, monitoring and policing their bodies. As such, society deprives women of their bodily agency, and their sexuality is contained. Conversely, women’s resistance to these constraints is integral to their efforts to own and have control over their sexuality and bodies. A woman’s right to choose her clothes without fear of consequences is thus closely related to her right to have agency over her own body.

3.2 ADHERENCE TO DRESS CODES AS AN INDICATION OF MORAL VALUE

‘My parents think that an unveiled girl is a bad girl. A girl who wears a wide dress that shows her body is a bad girl. A girl who wears tight clothes to show her body is a bad girl. A girl must have a certain appearance and a certain function – and anything but the stereotype [conforming to social norms] is unacceptable.’ (Berna, 33, trans woman, human rights defender)

The women’s testimonies show the value society confers on their clothing and reveal how dress codes are used as a tool for judging their morals and stigmatizing anyone who transgresses these norms. In some contexts, veiled women are stigmatized as being ‘backward’ or oppressed. Yet on the whole, there is a positive correlation between the extent to which a woman covers her body and society’s ‘respect’ for her. This presents as follows: the more a woman’s body is covered – whether by choice or because she has submitted to societal pressure – the more society is satisfied with her. Conversely, the more her body is exposed, the more dissatisfaction she experiences and the less respected she is.

The of ‘decency’ is dominant in social norm across contexts, and it governs women’s dress codes in all six countries in the study.

Lebanon Support Gender Dictionary definitions (2016) of ‘decency’ include the words ‘modesty’, ‘stoicism’, ‘dignity’, ‘etiquette’ and ‘prude’. Words to describe the opposite of ‘decency’ in the same dictionary were: ‘obscenity’, ‘indecent’, ‘immorality’, ‘promiscuity’, ‘prostitution’, ‘daring’, ‘insolence’, ‘pornography’, ‘sinfulness’, ‘dissolution’, ‘abomination’, ‘perjury’, ‘decay’, ‘rudeness’, ‘obscenity’, ‘raving’ and ‘impurity’.

We are left wondering how society expects women to dress, in particular to express ‘modesty’, ‘dignity’, ‘politeness’ and ‘humility’. Meanwhile, men are free of these expectations, according to societal standards.

The writer Farah Youssef (2021) argues that the process of drawing boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable dress begins in the early stages of puberty, perhaps even earlier. Girls understand from a young age that they are a source of 'temptation' to men, and that they are required to ward this off through decency. Most of their body becomes *awrah*, a term used to describe the parts of the body that must be concealed, according to cultural and religious norms. **Women's bodies and features start to become a burden, something to be concealed and despised, to avoid being labelled obscene or being controlled and disciplined.**

It is important to note that wearing 'decent' clothing was not seen by participants as guaranteeing protection against violence. Many veiled women reported being harassed, showing that strict dress codes and transgressions from them are a mere excuse for male censorship of and violence against women.

3.3 SOCIAL NORMS WITH FAR-REACHING IMPLICATIONS

Modesty in dress means different things across the MENA region: within each of the six countries, and even within each city, the dress code differs. Each participant's answer varied regarding the parts of their body that they were expected to hide or places they were harassed for revealing. Answers ranged from hair, neck, chest, arms, armpits and wrists to thighs, legs, knees and ankles. Some women were obliged to cover their bodies completely and were only allowed to let their face remain visible. Others were required to cover their face, including their eyes. In some situations, women were allowed to wear trousers, but loose ones that do not reveal the shape of the body were preferred. In other contexts, trousers were strictly prohibited. Some places permitted women to not wear the veil, especially in capitals and major cities, while in other areas wearing the veil was a prerequisite for women's presence in a public space.

The veil women are expected to wear takes many forms. In some contexts, being veiled means covering just the hair, without strict or specific rules on covering the rest of the body. In others, as in some areas of Iraq, there is an obligation to wear the abaya. In certain areas of Jordan and Palestine, the veil means a jilbab (robes), while in parts of Egypt it takes the form of a lengthy loose dress (Esdal). Saba from Palestine referred to the implications of these different social norms around women's clothing within the same country:

'I remember that I decided to put on a veil at the age of 18. For my family, it was too early for me. My mother veiled at the age of 30, and my aunt at the age of 40. My family did not have a culture of the veil, so my father objected, but the wider community supported and encouraged me.

When I married, my husband's family had a different culture than the one I grew up in. To them, the veil I wore was not enough. When I changed how I wrapped my hijab to a "turban", I faced negative reactions. I experienced challenges and different pressures in conflicting directions. One group was pressuring me to wear the hijab a certain way, and another was pressuring me to take it off. Personally, I wear the hijab because I express myself this way. I consider it violent for someone to pressure me to take it off, and violent when someone tells me my hijab is not enough.

When my sister decided to marry a man she loves from a different culture, she also veiled because her husband's society did not accept a woman without a veil. This is why I see the issue of dress as a priority. It is based on other things as well; it affects women economically, and their opportunities and positions in the labour market as well.

In the evolving Palestinian context, there are governorates where veiled women are given priority. Of course, when we talk about the veil, it means different things to different people. This may mean a long and modest dress. It may mean wearing a veil exclusively on the head. In another context, like Bethlehem, it is easier to blend in if you're not veiled. In Ramallah, there

is an internal struggle over women's dress code. In the north, the dress code is more modest. Wherever you go, your dress plays a key role.' (Saba, 33, health worker, Palestine)

3.4 HOW SOCIAL NORMS PERPETUATE VIOLENCE

The women's narratives concur with the feminist literature on prevailing norms of respectability, including decency in dress, in that these norms preserve, normalize, justify and legitimize violence against women and girls. Lina from Jordan said:

'If I encourage any girl to choose what and how she wants to dress, she may be beaten by her family. Sometimes she might even be deprived of activities she used to partake in, such as going out. The violence may even reach the point of her being killed at the hands of her family. You cannot anticipate the catastrophic outcomes of what might happen.' (Lina, 31, NGO worker, Jordan)

This is institutionalized violence, especially considering that institutions and authorities place greater blame on female victims of violence and sexual assault if their clothing is considered to be provocative, insufficient or indecent. These norms impose a responsibility on men to 'correct and control' women's dress codes. A study conducted by Oxfam in Morocco (2019) documented this phenomenon. It found that most male respondents (78%) agreed that the husband has the right to force his wife to change her dressing habits, 64% thought that women should dress 'modestly', and 73% said they would not come to the aid of an abused woman if her clothes were 'disrespectful'.

Consequently, women who do not adhere to what is considered decent and respectful lose 'patriarchal protection'. They are often perceived as deserving of punishment and discipline. Therefore, failure to adhere to societal standards of decency often results in gender-based violence.

Pressure on women to conform to dress codes is often accompanied by attempts to restrict their movement and other aspects of their daily activities. Although women experience violence regardless of what they wear, society blames them for their choice of clothing when they are victims of violence, sexual assault, harassment or rape. Clothes became a means to vilify and stigmatize women who experience violence, as though they were deserving of the harm they suffered. The cliché question is usually asked every time women report being exposed to violence: 'What were you wearing during the incident?'. In other words, women are held responsible for provoking men, and thus for the violence they suffer at men's hands.

Fidaa from Iraq stated: 'Every place has a dress code. If the workplace is full of men, I prefer my dress to be loose-fitting and not clinging to the body. I take all these considerations to avoid blame, so if there ever was a problem, I am not told: "You were wearing such and such."' (Fidaa, 35, teacher, Iraq)

Thus, due to social norms, society blames women for the violence they suffer, and they are pressured to conform with a dress code in order to be 'safe' in a patriarchal society dominated by men. As Fadwa from Lebanon said:

Society made men wolves and asked women to protect themselves from them.' (Fadwa, 35, teacher, Lebanon)

This idea that women are responsible for protecting themselves comes at a high cost, with great psychological, social and economic repercussions for women. It also sends an implicit message to men that they can always escape punishment, which makes women even more vulnerable to various types of violence.

4.POLITICAL MOTIVES FOR VIOLENCE RELATED TO DRESS CODES

‘Our bodies are in a political dispute. After the political and economic failures of the current regimes, they found nothing to distract people with except for making our bodies a [source of] conflict.’ (Miral, 22, trans woman, activist and writer)

Women’s interpretations of the motives for violence inflicted on them on the pretext of their clothing varied, but they agreed that this violence was a direct product of the patriarchal system. Many participants pointed out that the patriarchy is in a state of crisis. Women’s mass entry into the public sphere through work, education and political participation has disrupted power dynamics and social structures, sounding the alarm that the patriarchy may no longer be able to control women. This forced the regime to respond by imposing a systematic form of policing, rewriting the rules on ‘acceptable’ women’s clothing, and punishing women with violent discipline if they don’t adhere to these rules.

Haneen, a 35-year-old researcher from Egypt, describes norms around dress and the violence that stems from it as ‘a sacrifice that women have to make to be accepted... into the public space’. This view is in line with the arguments of social sciences researcher Mohamed Naim (2014). He states that while the patriarchal system does not have the financial capabilities to oblige women to stay at home, it cannot offer women the entitlements that being in the public sphere should bring, in terms of both acceptance and encouragement. He says: ‘This produced turmoil and anxiety that turned into unprecedented aggression.’ According to Naim, ‘aggression rates increased but with a kind of social consensus acknowledging the presence of women in the public sphere. With this acknowledgment, women moved from discrimination to abuse [and debasement].’

Many participants pointed to the role of political regimes in perpetuating social norms around clothing, and their role in legitimizing violence that occurs in relation to dress codes. Control of women’s bodies and clothing was an essential part of states’ formation in the MENA region. Historically, it was employed to reinforce a collective national, political and religious identity. As such, oppression of women is used as a political tool by conservative political and religious institutions and dominant political systems. The Ben Ali regime is an example of this, where the government placed an institutional ban on the veil. This is evidence of how **the bodies and clothing of women are sometimes used as a symbolic expression of a political victory**.

In some contexts, religious and security institutions use women’s bodies to create a state of ‘moral panic’ to promote strong conservative societal values, which are held against women and sexual and gender minorities. This is especially the case during periods of political tension and economic stagnation, as seen in Egypt:

‘The motive was 100% political because the appearance of women was the most prominent feature of the political victory. Mubarak’s regime welcomed violence against women, and it systematically tolerated it, because it considered women part of a bargain: we will give you women in exchange for not making other problems.’ (Manal, 32, journalist, Egypt)

As for the current system, Maya from Egypt said: ‘It tries to satisfy the Salafi currents. It is climbing up and down a ladder. Sometimes it satisfies the Salafists, and sometimes it upsets them. Sometimes it satisfies the international community, and sometimes it upsets it.’ (Maya, 35, cultural worker, Egypt)

Saba from Palestine shared: ‘Sometimes I feel that society expresses its ideas through women’s clothing. If it is very conservative, it seeks to impose a certain conservative dress on women because it is an essential way to reflect the ideology. The same is true of regimes that claim not to adopt a religious ideology explicitly. In both cases, women’s bodies are a vehicle for expressing societal

ideology and power. This is an exploitation of women simply for being women. It overwhelms women with the burden of representing the society they come from as its face, forcing them to abide by its standards in terms of grooming, in all its details, down to the colour.’ (Saba, 33, health worker, Palestine)

Rimal, also from Palestine, added: ‘The occupation plays a major role in every aspect of life. These existing systems of violence [prevail]... because the colonial mentality is closely linked to a patriarchal, authoritarian and controlling mentality.’ (Rimal, 22, student, Palestine)

One story that struck a different note to the others was that of Ginar from Kurdistan, whose narrative focused on the social and economic structures and political frameworks that reinforce the patriarchal structure of society in Iraq, consequently restricting women’s freedom of action and choice of clothing. Her testimony revealed how these criteria have evolved along with the changing situation in Iraq:

“I think there are different motives for imposing social norms on women’s bodies and clothing. Looking back, I remember growing up surrounded by many stories of women being murdered. I was terrified by the rumors and gossip about the clothing and appearances of the women victims of ‘honour killings. I was a child then, in the late 1990s, when the situation in society was completely different. Poverty prevailed then due to the economic sanctions on Iraq. Many things have changed now. However, the structure of society was, and still is, authoritarian, but some people might say it is tribal. The mere thought of women having individuality [or freedom] in appearance poses an existential threat to the stability of the family, as it was related directly to unity and stability, which must remain the constant, because it is what makes individuals safe in difficult circumstances — especially since the support of the family is essential to provide safety and food.”

She adds “This is a thing of the past. But until now, women are still very dependent on the family and the man. In Kurdistan, you cannot get an apartment on your own as a woman without prior official permission from security. This keeps you trapped in the patriarchal familial structure. Security will ask you: ‘Where is your father? Where is your husband? Why do you want to live alone?’ This happened to me in Sulaymaniyah. I told them that I had not married yet, my family did not live here, and I wanted to work here. I had to rely on a connection provided by one of my male friends. It was very difficult to get permission. I used to live in an ordinary popular neighbourhood and was not allowed to host friends in my house because the neighbours were watching me all the time. You cannot live freely if you cannot live in an apartment on your own as a citizen. You cannot get out of this system. You must care about what your family thinks of you and make sure that they support your decisions. There is no opportunity for you to make your own decisions. Many societal constraints come into play because if you, as a woman, cannot have your independence, you cannot easily break any rules or develop a support system that keeps you safe; you cannot secure a job that makes you financially safe. You will always have to do what the family dictates. In such circumstances, it is difficult for women to negotiate their clothing and appearance.” (Ginar, 32, researcher, Kurdistan)

5. RELIGION, NATION AND FAMILY: MULTIPLE SOURCES OF VIOLENCE

It is important to consider the women's differing circumstances to avoid generalizations, especially when discussing a region as broad and diverse as the Middle East and North Africa. The level of violence inflicted upon women who transgress social norms relating to clothing varies according to several factors, including geographical location and the political regime. The impacts of this violence are multiplied when it intersects with other factors such as class, gender identity and sexual orientation, as discussed later. The narratives reveal how the violence is woven into the fabric of women's daily lives and entrenched in public and private spheres. It manifests in financial, sexual, physical and verbal violence that men perpetrate against women, and to which women sometimes subject other women.

Public and private institutions practice this violence, and the institutions that women are expected to seek shelter in are often complicit in it, either by directly perpetrating violence or by condoning and justifying it.

5.1 FAMILY POLICING

According to participants, the responsibility of the family is primarily to 'police' female members' appearance and clothing, with fathers and brothers in charge of repression and discipline. This role is transferred to husbands if the women marry. Manar, from Lebanon, pointed out that not all men take on this role willingly:

'Society considers that men must repress and discipline women, especially if their clothing is considered revealing or scandalous. They, in turn, are subjected to questioning of their manhood when they refuse or hesitate to play this role. My fear for my young brothers from the possible violent reactions of our surroundings is what has always compelled me, consciously or unconsciously, to adhere to modest clothing.' (Manar, 30, journalist, Lebanon)

It is usually mothers, and sometimes the other women of the family, including aunts, who are responsible for ensuring that their daughters adhere to social norms on clothing. Many reported that their mothers and female relatives are censorious and participate in the violence inflicted on them on the pretext of their clothing:

'One time, I told my mother-in-law that my husband beat me whenever he did not like how I was dressed. She replied, "It is normal. We were beaten and swollen. You deserve to be hit when you do not abide by his word." My mother said to me: "Your husband is jealous a little, what is the problem with that?"' (Hasna, 29, unemployed, Jordan)

Participants indicated that the surrounding community and extended family also play a prominent role in controlling their clothes and putting pressure on them, sometimes more than their nuclear families, to abide by societal expectations. Many indicated that their families succumbed to this pressure, as demonstrated by the experience of Samar from Palestine:

'I arrived home, and before I greeted them, I told them: "I will never wear the veil again. This is my final decision." My mother began to cry. My father said to me at first, "That is your business." But a week later, when he was running for the municipal elections in the village, he came back and asked if I could postpone my decision a little because it would affect the elections and the votes he might get. The people around us were saying: "Why do you not wait a little while and take off the veil when you get engaged or married?"' (Samar, 34, worker in a local organization, Palestine)

5.2 THE PUBLIC SPHERE AS A 'WAR ZONE'

'When I want to walk down the street, I feel as though I am preparing for war. It is essential to assess my preparedness, and to decide whether or not to go to war today.' (Maysoon, 31, researcher, Jordan)

Social norms around clothing limit women's ability to participate effectively in the public sphere and to move within it freely and safely. The presence of women in the public sphere is conditional on them appearing 'modest' and 'respectful', and any violation of these social norms deprives them of their right to safety and security.

Most participants expressed insecurity about going out if they were dressed the way they wanted. As one said: 'Women are often seen as objects for the gratification of sexual arousal. Therefore, unless they dress modestly, they are blamed for the violence and sexual harassment they may suffer because it is "their fault". Participants indicated that they think carefully about how they dress when going out and adopt strategies to prevent violence, such as reducing their movement, travelling by private car rather than public transport, or having a male accompany them while in transit.

Walking down the street and using public transport are daily activities that should be simple and ordinary, but in reality they pose a real challenge for many women, especially female employees and students. Hence, some viewed the public sphere as a 'war zone', which requires incentive and preparation to take part in.

5.3 VIOLENCE AT THE HANDS OF THE LAW

Many women viewed the law and the agencies responsible for its enforcement as primary sources of violence, whether through condoning violence or imposing unjust conditions which perpetuate a continuous cycle of violence against women. Several participants stated that the laws in their countries are not deterrents, but instead are tolerant of violence against them. Agencies responsible for enforcing the law are directly complicit in committing violence, especially in the case of transgender women.

Some women stated that the police intervene selectively or only after the incident, especially if news of it goes viral on social media. In a few cases where participants had reported a violent incident to the police, they said that the procedures that followed did not adequately protect them. They also mentioned the police's reluctance to file a complaint, while some claimed that they were subjected to degrading treatment or that the police did not understand the sensitivity required in such cases. The majority of women emphasized their lack of confidence in their country's institutional and legal structures, which in turn made them reluctant to report violence. Rana from Egypt recalled:

'I filed a complaint against my brother, who beat me because I went out wearing trousers without the niqab. He severely abused me and prevented me from getting my pocket money. So, I filed a non-exposure report. The first time I went to the police station, the report was not registered, on the pretext that there were no visible cuts on my face. The effects of the beatings are visible on different parts of my body. So, I took the initiative to write about what happened on social media, and the matter spread widely. A few days later, the Public Prosecution Office, as I remember, notified the village police, who finally wrote the report. I am glad that my voice finally was heard.' (Rana, 22, student, Egypt)

5.4 VIOLENCE UNDER THE GUISE OF RELIGION

Across the six countries, participants indicated that the predominant religious discourse contributed to the patriarchal societal norms on clothing that justified violence against them. As well as policing women's appearance by imposing a dress code, this discourse also encourages sanctions on anyone who doesn't adhere to these norms, ultimately promoting the notion that women's bodies are a 'temptation' that must be resisted.

Mona from Tunisia said: 'The mosque issued something like a petition in which we, as women, were prevented from simply passing the mosque or sitting in the café next to it, because "our clothing is revealing" and "our behaviour is scandalous". We as women sarcastically called this area "the suffocation of the Goblin" because of its restrictions.' (Mona, 25, teacher, Tunisia)

Maysa from Lebanon stated: 'Religious institutions tolerate violence against women because of their clothing, as a means of consolidating their social roles that are not intended to change.' (Maysa, 30, journalist, Lebanon)

5.5 IN THEIR OWN WORDS: WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE

The participants shared memories of different phases of their lives. Notably, many saw their experience of violence related to clothing as starting in childhood or adolescence, as that was when a list of restrictions and prohibitions was first imposed on them, to be continued over the years.

Their insights challenged the common perception of violence, especially held by legal systems, which considers violence as individual harm inflicted by specific perpetrators on specific victims. They pointed instead to violence as a larger-scale, collective act. To view violence against women simply in terms of isolated incidents is limiting, because it reinforces the idea that this violence is rare, while reports show the opposite to be true. **The 60 participants, without exception, revealed that they had been subjected to one or more forms of violence because of non-conformity with dress codes.** This was true even for those who adhered to the standards of 'decency' prevailing in their society, whether out of conviction or a desire to avoid violence.

The experiences cited indicate that the violence women experience is inherent in their daily lives, despite their efforts to reduce and avoid it. **Participants reported that the violence intensified the more their clothing was seen as challenging to the norm. Daily experiences with violence range from microaggressions to explicit violent acts, including physical abuse and death threats.**

'There are types of clothing that I wear depending on where I am going and the degree of harassment I may be exposed to. For example, when I go to a government office, I ensure that I am covered well, my hair is pulled up, and my appearance is as neutral and unappealing as possible. The day I take public transport, I know in advance that it will be an "extremely ugly" day. Of course, I cannot wear anything tight or short because of the harassment I will be subjected to. So, my wardrobe is organized depending on the time, place and levels of harassment I might have to endure.' (Dalida, 25, local NGO worker, Egypt)

Microaggressions are among the most common types of violence the participants experienced, regardless of background. These are defined by Derald Wing Sue (2010) as 'daily verbal and nonverbal insults, whether intentional or unintended, loaded with hostile, degrading, or negative messages, and aimed at people simply because they belong to marginalized groups.' This violence takes the form of unsolicited advice, verbal insults, degrading and abusive comments about the body, appearance and dress, as well as unwanted sexual insinuations, looks designed to cause discomfort, being followed, and other forms of routine violence at home, on the street and in places of study and work.

Below are some of the participants' recollections of the microaggressions they had experienced:

'My mother said: "You must cover your hair to hide this disaster." By disaster, she meant my curly hair.' (Manal, 32, journalist, Egypt)	'My family said, "You are overweight, do not wear tight clothes."' (Yasmine, 33, journalist, Egypt)	'During a visit to the family's home, the neighbour stopped me and grabbed my hair and said: "You have beautiful hair, but isn't it Haram [forbidden] to show it?" That was right after I took off my veil.' (Maysoon, 31, researcher, Jordan)
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'Various times, I would go out to stay late with my friends, and places wouldn't allow me to enter, or they tell me to put my veil back in the form of a "turban" so they can let me in. The situation is full of class arrogance and a sense of violence and humiliation.' (Laila, 34, human rights worker, Egypt)	'I was 12 years old when my uncle told me, "Because you are not wearing a veil, you are forbidden to come with us on the trip." (Samar, 34, worker in a local organization, Palestine)	'I am subjected to harassment in the street. For example, a car would block the road in front of me, and the driver would offer to give me a ride.' (Aya, 32, teacher, Egypt)
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'I hear them say that I am a whore because I dress the way I do.' (Fadia, 28, unemployed, Lebanon)	'While applying to roll in secondary exams, I had to wait a long time, even though I was one of the first to arrive, because I was not wearing a veil and my chest was uncovered.' (Tania, 22, student, Iraq)	'My aunts have told me "While it is true that you do not wear the veil, it is still good of you that you are modest in your clothing." (Jinan, 22, student, Lebanon)
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'People always intimidate me, and I am consistently told that "hell awaits me" because of my clothing.' (Feda, 35, teacher, Iraq)	'I was just a child, and I was wearing a veil and walking to school. It was one of the rare times that my parents let me walk from our house to school. While walking, someone grabbed me from behind and pinched me. I stopped in the middle of the street and started crying.' (Samira, 31, researcher, Egypt)	'There is violence even if it does not lead to murder. There is violence – symbolic violence. There is violence that leads to depression. There is daily violence that leads women to suicide. Many trans women die from depression caused by this daily violence.' (Emma, 22, trans woman, student)
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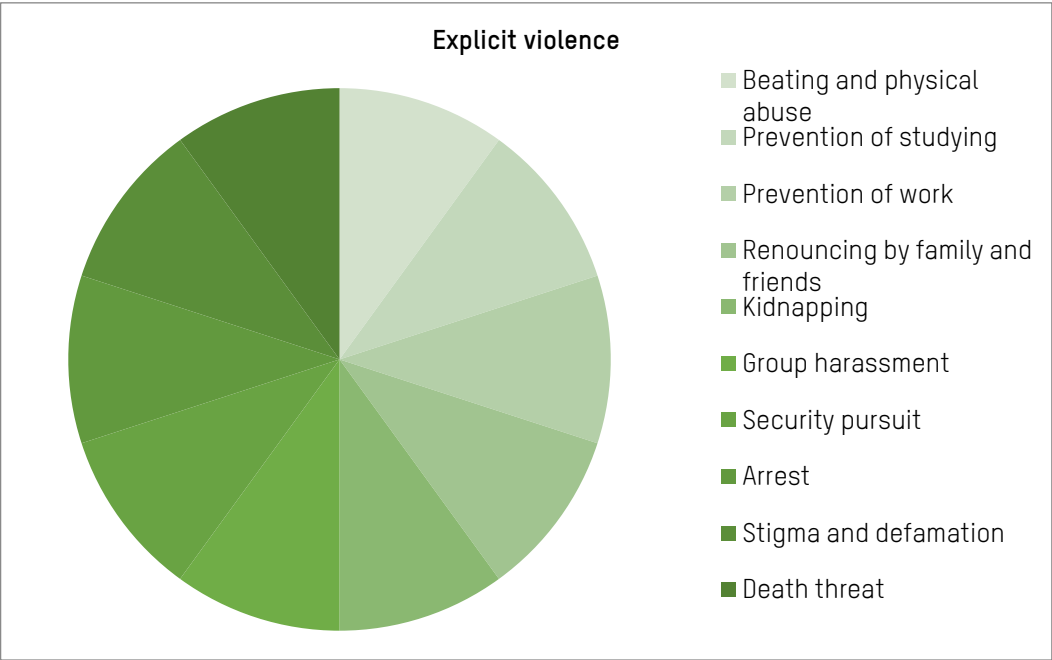
The women emphasized the seriousness of microaggressions. Not only do these acts constitute verbal, psychological or sexual violence and abuse, but their cumulative effects put women in a semi-permanent state of self-monitoring, limiting their capacity to participate fully in public life. Manar from Lebanon described the daily and continuous burden this creates:

'Growing up, I adhered to [the prescribed] clothing standards because my family is very conservative and to avoid getting into trouble. I witnessed the harassment my "fashionable" female relatives went through, which bothered them and me. They were chased down the streets by young men on motorbikes. Where I grew up, girls were used to being subjected to

harassment because of the way they dressed. This is frightening... It reflects how women are viewed as inferior and how that brings about crimes committed against them. I felt like I had to hide my body because it was a potential source of harm. Despite my relatively modest appearance, society kept demanding more of me. My extended family pressured me, which pressured my father to ask me to cover up. Other family members were constantly preaching to me. I tried to avoid them as much as possible because it became a psychological burden. I have always been harassed on the street and on public transport. I certainly do not feel safe walking at night. Whenever a friend of mine drops me by my house, the space between me and the house becomes the setting for all possible bad fantasies and obsessions. I run for fear of getting hurt. So, I get used to walking faster during the day. I do not feel safe, and when moving from one place to another, I worry.’ (Manar, 30, journalist, Lebanon)

Many women also shared their experiences of explicit violence, which was often in response to them transgressing social norms regarding clothing, and for some involved physical abuse and death threats. The narratives revealed that most explicit forms of violence on the pretext of clothing were accompanied either by an attempt to forcibly impose the veil on the women or to discipline them for abandoning it. Other incidents were related by women who were forced to wear the veil a young age without a full understanding or conviction, or because their conviction changed at a later stage of their lives. Participants’ stories reveal that the decision to take off or refuse the veil did not happen overnight but resulted from years of struggle, internal negotiation and conversations with themselves and society. The fear of violent reactions, whether from their parents or the community, was one of the biggest difficulties they faced.

Figure 1: Types of explicit violence experienced by participants



Younger participants were the most exposed to explicit violence, as they did not enjoy independence or sufficient economic resources, and they lived with their families and sometimes near their extended families. According to their descriptions, most of their families are ‘conservative’ because they place strict standards on women’s clothing. Participants’ stories also revealed how gender intersects with age, social class, sectarianism and other forms of structural discrimination and oppression.

Below are some of the recollections shared by participants on their experiences of explicit violence.

‘... Following my younger brother’s death, I returned to the village. There at the funeral, I was crying, and the veil was slipping from my head. People were more eager to cover my hair than to console me and share my grief. After this incident, I decided to take off the veil after I had taken off the

niqab. I was subjected to significant violence from my family and people on the street during this period. I was afraid most of the time, and people treated me humiliatingly. They refused to take me on public transport in the village. The men looked disgusted. Children in the street stoned me, and women on transport complained about my presence. After that, one of the villagers spread a rumour that I had become a Christian and had taken money from the church... When I went to confront the rumour-maker and prove he was spreading lies, he beat me and locked me in his house for four hours with the help of his cousins. My uncles, who stole my mother's inheritance, told them to do whatever they wanted to me.' (Rana, 22, student, Egypt)

'I remember all the details of the moment I put on the veil. I came back from school. The Islamic Teachings teacher called my parents and told them, "Your daughter has grown up, and she must wear the veil." When I came home, I found that my mother had already prepared the veil. However, I refused to wear it because I loved my hair. When I refused to do so, she beat my face horribly. I was a child then, and I was afraid to be faced with more violence, so I put it on reluctantly, and when I got out of the house to go to school, I took it off. When she found out, she banned me from going to school for two years. She also banned me from leaving the house and communicating with my close friend. My primary school classmates do not remember me at all because of what my parents did. I forgot my childhood memories and all the things I would have loved to do, just like any other human being. I went back to school after two years. I was forced to wear the veil. See, I had two choices – either wear it to get an education, or not wear it and stay at home. So, I was forced to wear it against my will from that day until now.' (Manar, 19, student, Iraq)

'I remember very well when my parents veiled me in the seventh grade, against my will. While I tried to justify that I had not reached puberty yet as a means to escape, I failed in dissuading them. I remember one day, I was out of the house, happy with my freshly styled hair, with a light veil over my hair. My father was not at home at the time, but I saw him coming toward me. He approached me as if he was trying to run over me, so I fell on the thorns in the street. Then he blamed me because I was not completely covering my hair. There was a time when skinny-fit trousers became fashionable, so I tightened all my trousers and was happy because I dressed up fashionably, only for my father and brothers to cut all the trousers, saying, "This clothing is for disrespectful girls."

'I remember a lot of situations like this... You take me back to the past while still being in the present. There is still much suffering [for me] from my husband in this regard. My husband was very open-minded. He played the role of a lover who had no problem with anything and was never religious. I felt that this young man was the one I wanted... His mentality was different from that of my family. However, a month or two after we married, he asked me, "What do you think about putting on a niqab?" I refused. Then he began to monitor my clothing closely. He used to ask me every morning, before going to work, to wake him up so that he could see what I was wearing. One day, a small part of my hair was sticking out from under the veil. He grabbed my visible tuft of hair and said, "I will burn this part of your hair that is showing if you show it again."

'During the first few days of our marriage, I tried to talk to him about removing the veil. He told me, "I married you with a veil, and I do not want to be the people's gossip material," and threatened to divorce me. The next day, my father called me and said that I was "disgracing the family" and that if I thought about taking off the veil again, I would find myself "shrouded in a grave".' (Hasna, 29, unemployed, Jordan)

'My family is very religious, and I faced many complications being a single mother. My father is married to another woman and has older children. My family is very patriarchal – they work in market and trade. Most of my brothers are uneducated. This combination creates a lot of problems and crises. The veil, for example, was an issue that arose all the time with great urgency, year after year. I disliked the veil but loved playing and riding a bicycle. However, the clothing I had to wear started increasing piece by piece, especially when my body became more shaped and taboos increased... I remember that I was in the third grade, about nine years old. It was Eid, and I was wearing trousers and a half-sleeved T-shirt. My brother saw me as he was smoking a cigarette, so he

burned my arm with it and said to me: "In this family, we do not have girls who dress this way, so you can keep thinking about this later." It was a very tough moment for me. I was terrified for a long time. My father allowed my brothers to treat me this way, and my mother implicitly agreed to my veil. So, I veiled, and after a while, veils and abayas became fashionable, so I put them on. These were the things I did that my family was most proud of.' (Samira, 31, researcher, Egypt).

'I grew up in a village far from Beirut. My father was secular, and my mother was very conservative. Then my father switched from his secular ideology and told me that I should not violate the rules of the society in which I lived, and at the age of seven, I was forced to wear the veil. I was happy at first because I was wearing new clothing like adults. However, at 12, I started complaining to my family and telling them I wanted to take off the veil. However, my plea was rejected because they viewed the veil as a one-way ticket from which there was no coming back. My school, like my family and society, was also very conservative. The veil is not only seen as a religious commitment but also a political one. My dislike of the veil developed over the years until I seriously decided to take it off.

'When I talked to my family about the issue, I faced physical and verbal abuse to the point that my father threatened me with a gun. That is when I decided to stop trying to convince them. For two months, I took off my hijab in secret. Then I decided to leave the family home. I was a minor at the time. I was not yet 18 years old. So, I prepared my university scholarship, my things and my papers, and I contacted a lawyer whom a friend of mine connected me to. I ran away from the house and hid from security for 18 days – as I was not yet 18 years old, I would have faced the crime of "fleeing home". My photo circulated the village on social media as a fugitive. Four different parties conducted organized search campaigns and circulated my photos in Baalbek, the South, Tripoli and Al-Jabal to search for me.

'The region's mayor issued statements condemning me, my friends were threatened and my grandfather beat my mother because he accused her of facilitating my escape. My cousins were beaten to reveal my whereabouts, which they knew nothing about. When I turned 18, I went with my lawyer to the Intelligence Branch, and they dropped the case against my friends and me. Today I am reconciled with my family, who took extra steps to approach me. However, society continued to slander them for me being "undisciplined" and living alone in Beirut. My father still receives calls from the extended family saying that I am being watched, especially when I go to my village. It all happened in the last four years of my life. I always fear for my safety, and I am afraid of stalking, especially when there are threats and calls to stone me in the village square. However, to this day, I still do not know what crime I committed... What did I do that hurt them to the point of threatening to kill me?' (Lubna, 19, student, Lebanon)

6. THE IMPACTS OF SOCIAL CLASS AND GENDER NON-CONFORMITY

‘If you had met Saba at 23, you would see she is not the same Saba at the age of 33. Today’s Saba is a manager. It is not easy for someone to comment on my appearance, nor my clothing, because my position protects me. Saba now has her car and does not have to ride public transport and meet people she does not want to meet. This is what protects her from harassment and violence in the street.’ (Saba, 33, health worker, Palestine)

The study found that although gender-conforming/non-conforming women of all classes and ages experience violence and dress-related restrictions, they do not experience these equally.

6.1 HOW CLASS AND ECONOMIC STATUS AFFECT WOMEN’S EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE

Saba’s statement above shows how some women who enjoy privileges afforded to them by their class and social network can avoid many of the constraints that younger women and those from lower classes experience every day. Some women mentioned how owning a private car or being able to pay for a private taxi like ‘Uber’ helped greatly in avoiding exposure to harassment in the street. Factors like age and class increased their ability to be relatively free from societal censorship when wearing whatever they wanted. Some reported that access to economic resources had enabled them to negotiate a better situation for themselves or to leave restrictive and violent contexts.

Lina’s experience in Jordan provides an example of the role of financial independence in empowering women to choose how they dress and look. Lina discussed her upbringing with her extended family in a very conservative part of Jordan, where girls and women were forbidden to wear anything other than the veil and abaya. She talked about her father making her wear the veil at a very young age, despite her objections. Lina recalled secretly leaving her family’s home at dawn one day, when she was 28 years old, and heading to the capital, Amman, where she found a job on her first day. Although her new reality allowed her to overcome the constraints imposed on her, she chose to keep wearing the veil out of her own conviction:

‘The work allowed me to be completely independent in my choices, giving me a stronger weapon to speak and object. Economic independence supported me when I was subjected to violence from my family and the surrounding community. It helped me to put together an alternative plan by renting my own house and supporting myself. When I returned to my family home for reconciliation a few years later, I was strong and had been arguing more boldly than before. I sent my family the message that I was a different and independent person now, and that no one would be able to force me to do anything else after today.’ (Lina, 31, NGO worker, Jordan)

However, financial resources and economic and social benefits are not available to all women, especially unemployed women, students, trans women and others. Many of the participants seemed aware of this. Rima, a Syrian refugee living in Lebanon, said:

‘I have enough privileges to be protected from discrimination compared to what women of lower economic classes are subjected to.’ (Rima, 33, researcher, Syrian refugee in Lebanon)

Rimal, a student from Palestine, added: 'There are spaces where you enjoy your freedom completely. However, they are class protected. In these spaces, women can wear whatever clothes they want. These are women belonging to the upper middle class or bourgeoisie. I always wonder where these women are in everyday life. They exist only in these spaces and are protected in them only.' (Rimal, 22, student, Palestine)

Indeed, as many participants pointed out, class disparity and unequal access to economic resources lead to some women being subjected to violence at higher rates than others. Women in 'class-protected' spaces, who do not have to travel on foot or depend on public transport, are less likely to be exposed to daily abuse than their counterparts in poorer areas, who lack the financial means to leave violent environments.

The intersection of discriminations and structural inequalities play a significant role in making women's experiences of violence different. The economic collapse that Lebanon has been witnessing since 2019, for example, has limited women's ability to leave violent relationships. Nineteen-year-old Lubna reported:

'... There are days when I do not have a single lira. There are days when I cannot buy anything to eat; on other days, I cannot even cover the transportation fare. The economic crisis is dire, and I am still looking for a real job opportunity. Job opportunities are limited to those who have social relationships and networks – which are not usually enjoyed by young women, especially not those who decided to flee violence and live alone. The current economic crisis only made things worse. I do not know how many opportunities are available to these women today, even if they are educated.' (Lubna, 19, student, Lebanon)

In environments facing instability, armed conflict or occupation, such as Iraq and Palestine, women can experience double levels of violence: the violence caused by the situation, and the silencing of women on the pretext that their issues are not a priority given the wider crisis. Rimal, a Palestinian student, said:

'As Palestinians, we face violence when colonialists perpetrate violence upon us daily. Violence is through the killings and harassment we face at Israeli checkpoints and in places that are supposed to provide us with safety, such as our community and families. On the pretext of conflict with the former (the occupier), we are silenced whenever we try to talk about other forms of violence.' (Rimal, 22, student, Palestine)

An intersectional lens is useful in analysing the violence experienced by transgender women, as discussed below. **If gender-conforming women experience violence to different degrees according to their social class, economic resources and their political and social environment, in most contexts trans women experience this violence many times over.**

6.2 TRANS WOMEN: 'NO PRIVILEGES HERE. ONLY VIOLATIONS'

'Women born as women, with female genitals, may experience violence due to social norms regarding their clothing. This may differ from one family to another, from one culture to another. Depending on the society to which they belong, they may or may not be allowed some room for manoeuvre or choice... But when it comes to trans women, they suffer violence in all contexts and in all stages of their lives, not only at home but in schools, workplaces, universities, cafés and on [public] transport, but in all these places together, and others as well.' (Berna, 33, trans woman, human rights defender)

All participating trans women shared experiences that indicate that the violence they experience is systemic and widespread. If gender-conforming women experience violence when they are perceived to break social norms on clothing, trans women's bodies in themselves are perceived as breaking social norms. For the patriarchy, non-stereotypical bodies challenge and transgress the gender hierarchy and the heteronormative gender binary. Not conforming with this strict gender binary results in punishment and discipline.

Leila, one of the participants, explained: 'When I give up my gender [the male gender], which is perceived as the strongest and the best gender, people considered it as if I was giving up what I am supposed to hold onto – the strongman category – or that I am unticking the "Holy Male Box". To give up this box is to give up power. This makes trans women more vulnerable to violence.' (Leila, 22, trans woman, student)

Berna stated: 'A man has to "man up", as the famous advertisement says. A "man" who expresses feminine looks in his clothes is sometimes reprimanded to a greater degree than a woman who is described as "decadent" because of her clothing.' (Berna, 33, trans woman, human rights defender)

The study finds that gender identity, along with class, plays a pivotal role in determining the degree to which women are exposed to dress restrictions and related violence. The violence is exacerbated by other factors such as race and sexual orientation. The violence trans women experience is physical, sexual, verbal, psychological, economic and legal. This leads to persistent feelings of fear, insecurity and isolation, especially in public spaces, as revealed by the experiences of Jana in Tunisia:

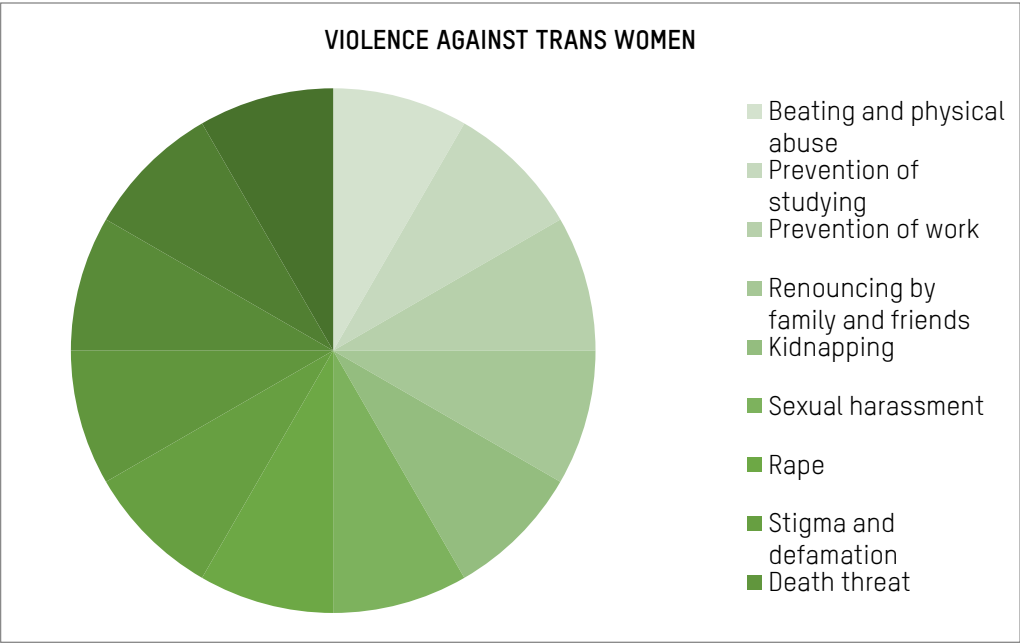
'A very large percentage of trans women fear going into the street because of the violence they experience there. I think carefully about my clothing, destination and means of transportation. I do not take public transport at all because it is not safe for me. I have a problem with housing. After I was forced to leave my parents' house, and because of my clothing, my appearance and me being trans, it was incredibly challenging for me to find suitable accommodation where I would not be subjected to violence and comments such as "You boy-girl" and "You boy – you bicycle". I always try to move with people I trust. I am always ready with a jacket in case of any emergency, especially since my identification papers do not reflect my gender, which might get me into trouble. Trans women always face great problems changing their official papers to be officially recognized as women. Therefore, I always try to avoid these caveats. Because any problem, no matter how tiny, may end in my imprisonment, especially since the law does not protect me at all. If I was walking in the street and I was harassed, I would not be able to respond because I might end up in prison for debauchery, public indecency and more.' (Jana, 23, trans woman, student)

Trans women are in a particularly precarious position because their gender identity is met with open hostility by society as a whole, including by some feminist movements and organizations concerned with defending women's rights. These movements do not address violence against trans women, as they argue that they are 'not real women'. Discrimination against trans women is also endemic in medical, legal and shelter services that are supposed to assist victims of violence, which increases trans women's isolation and may expose them to even greater levels of violence. Jana said:

'Trans women are not safe. In all their movements, they need a lawyer present to facilitate their presence in society and to have access to any services. Trans women are targeted and placed in men's prisons. Two months ago, a trans woman had her hair shaved off and was placed in a men's prison, despite her feminine features. Our existence is completely absent. We do not have the privilege of being free to choose how to dress. In our case, there are no privileges... There are only violations.' (Jana, 23, trans woman, student)

While belonging to a higher social class may provide gender-conforming women with greater protection from violence and relative freedom from social control, trans women do not share this luxury. For most trans women, access to financial resources and social support networks is scarce, often pushing them to work in an irregular, temporary, fragile and highly exploitative manner.

Figure 2: Types of violence experienced by trans women participants



7. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC COSTS OF VIOLENCE

‘Safety is expensive.’ (Miral, 22, trans woman, activist and writer)

Restrictions on women’s clothing and the daily violence they experience as a result place a heavy burden on them – physically, psychologically and economically. Participants refer to a constant fear that their physical space will be ‘invaded’, meaning they are always on high alert. The term ‘invaded’ fits with some participants’ characterization of public space as a war zone, as seen above. Throughout the interviews, women talked about the lengths they had to go to every day in an attempt to protect themselves from violence.

Some of the women avoid public places as much as possible. Many think carefully about their clothes, even the shoes they wear, in case they have to escape a violent encounter. Lamees, from Egypt, shared her feelings of anxiety while navigating the streets of Cairo:

‘I like to dress up and walk lightly, like a butterfly. However, I always feel tied up. Once, I was walking on Taksim Street in Turkey as I used to walk in Egypt: my bag on my chest in case someone touches me. I was so nervous about how crowded the place was. I approached my friend, surprised, and asked: “Why are we so anxious here?” The fact of the matter was that it was due to the violence I experienced in Cairo, which has become ingrained in my mind. I became afraid of the street. I started wearing shoes without heels, so as not to hinder me from running if I was in any alarming situation.’ (Lamees, 34, human rights worker, Egypt)

Shireen from Iraq said: ‘I spent one entire year without leaving the house because I could not face people, as I had gained weight. I was afraid that if I went down the street, I would be harassed and ridiculed for my weight gain.’ (Shireen, 33, unemployed, Iraq)

Sanaa from Egypt expressed her constant concern about being overwhelmed, after experiencing mass sexual harassment at a popular festive event more than 10 years ago.

‘After that incident, I started hating crowded places, and I do not go to a crowded place unless I see a clear exit gate. As you know, all parts of Egypt are crowded. For example, when I go to popular markets, I must specify ways to leave. I am often very tense and violent in my reactions to harassment, albeit [only] verbally.’ (Sanaa, 31 journalist, Egypt)

This violence has a financial cost as well as a psychological one; women incur an invisible tax, as they pay more in their quest to be safe and avoid society’s policing of their clothing. The majority of participants said they tried to avoid using public transport whenever possible. Most mentioned sexual harassment as one of the main reasons for their insecurity; they saw public transport as a space for male domination, manifested in negative judgments on women who enter the space. To avoid harassment and violence, women with sufficient financial resources resorted to travelling by taxi and private cars, which constituted an economic burden. Sanaa said:

‘In the last five years, I stopped taking public transport altogether because of sexual harassment. However, the prices of private transportation went up dramatically; [this] combined with the fact that I have to live far away for safety reasons, [meant] I had to resort to the metro again. However, if my dress were a bit revealing, I would pay more for an Uber ride.’ (Sanaa, 31 journalist, Egypt)

Many participants agreed with Sanaa and asserted that they are willing to pay more for ‘transport on demand’ services to avoid harassment on public transport. Zina from Iraq shared her experience of having to switch to private travel after being harassed on public transport:

‘It was the first time I shouted out loud at a harasser. I felt very comfortable that I confronted him, and the driver kicked him off, but he also blamed me for the “scene” I had caused. After this experience, I started using Uber for most of my travels. I spend three-quarters of my monthly salary on transportation via Uber and taxi.’ (Zina, 24, paramedic, Iraq)

Many participants also indicated that they pay higher rents to live in certain neighbourhoods because of the relative privacy, freedom and safety this provides. Berna said:

‘I spend most of my salary on accommodation, so no one bothers me. I tried to live in other places, but because my appearance is not typical, I had many problems and suffered from neighbours’ intrusion on my privacy.’ (Berna, 33, trans woman, human rights defender)

Lamis from Tunisia noted that daily activities cost women twice as much as men because they include a ‘safety cost’:

‘When young men go out, it does not cost them more than a few pounds to sit in any café at any time. The price of a cup of coffee for women is more, because it includes the cost of drinking coffee safely.’ (Lamis, 26, legal researcher, Tunisia)

Some participants indicated paying another unseen cost because of the violence they are subjected to: the cost of psychological treatment: ‘Dealing with the trauma and the bad experiences I have had is very expensive because it requires a psychiatrist.’ (Miral, 22, trans woman, activist and writer)

Women end up paying an invisible price in an attempt to ward off violence and reduce harm, whether by paying extra for safe transport or safe housing, or to do any other daily activity, such as drinking coffee peacefully in a café. This is in addition to the cost of psychological treatment that some women pay to try to recover from trauma. Thus, women pay a direct economic price for violence linked to social norms around their clothing. These same restrictions also affect women indirectly, by hindering their access to education and jobs, and thus to economic resources. Violence thus exacerbates gender inequality in access to resources and opportunities. Participants reported that non-conformity with dress standards was sometimes punished by depriving them of education, in turn reducing their economic prospects.

Jinan from Lebanon described how access to higher education was contingent on her conforming to a strict dress code:

‘Before I entered university, my father told my mother that I was forbidden to attend unless I wore the veil. We had a big fight that day, and I told my dad, if that was the case, “do not enroll me in the university”. I knew I might be able to go to university later, but if I put the hijab on, it would be hard to take it off.’ (Jinan, 22, student, Lebanon)

Some participants reported that they were discriminated against in the labour market and were judged for their clothing and appearance. Nouran from Lebanon shared her struggle with trying to find job opportunities due to her wearing the hijab:

‘When I moved to Beirut, I started looking for a job, so I applied to work in one of the well-known malls. One of the managers called me and literally said: “If you are veiled, make things short for us and do not apply to work here.” I faced similar refusals in different places, directly or indirectly. But this incident was the crudest of them all.’ (Nouran, 27, journalist, Lebanon)

Social norms on clothing influence women’s participation and shape their experiences in the labour market. Many participants reported toxic work environments in which they were subjected to discrimination and violence, whether from co-workers or managers, on the pretext of what they wore. Manal said:

'At work, I try to be as ugly as possible. Journalism is not an easy field for women, especially in Egypt. For example, when a good-looking colleague gives a scoop or an important investigation, it is quickly said that she had sex with the source of information. So, I decided to be as unappealing as possible, so there is no room for questioning my professionalism.' (Manal, 32, journalist, Egypt)

Saba shared how dress codes affect women's opportunities to work:

'In my scenario, the veil posed some obstacles to me. Once I put it on, it was easier for me to do fieldwork. Moreover, if I decided to take it off, it would be easier to work as manager. You may say I am exaggerating. However, honestly, it is tangible. My sister, for example, studied tourism, and it was easier for her to work in tourism without a veil. Nevertheless, when she decided to put on the veil, she had to leave tourism and work in a call centre, which does not meet her aspirations and interests. This affected her economically because the monetary return of her work in tourism was much higher.' (Saba, 33, health worker, Palestine)

8. WOMEN'S EVERYDAY RESISTANCE

As this study has shown, women face societal stigmatization of their bodies, appearance and clothes, and are held responsible for violence inflicted against them for what is considered a violation of social norms. Various strategies of resistance emerged in the interviews. It is important to highlight this, as it not only reveals the pervasive nature of the violence women face, but also demonstrates that they are not necessarily passive recipients of it. Rather, women are meeting the multiple levels of violence with daily resistance to authoritarian structures, as they use their agency to regain bodily autonomy. As Maria Frederika Malmströms (2012) suggests, agency is the ability to act within the constraints of the social and cultural context in which women exist. This study previously referred to some of the strategies participants adopt as 'everyday resistance strategies'. James Scott introduced this concept of resistance in his book *The Weapon of the Weak*, which refers to actions people take in daily life to undermine those in power.

Women's daily resistance includes wearing what they like in private, away from the scrutiny of their family and environment, avoiding interfering relatives, and writing anonymously about their experiences on social media. It can take the form of women's deliberate neglect of their appearance and clothing – a refusal to play to the "male gaze" – in protest against the commodification and objectification of their bodies. Acts of resistance include women avoiding places where they are likely to be subjected to violence because of their clothes and surrounding themselves with an all-female support network.

As discussed above, using private transportation services provides safer movement for women who can afford this. It also enables them to hold service providers accountable if they are harassed and increases their ability to change drivers' behaviour, giving women greater control. This is in itself a form of resistance, as documented by feminist researcher Rana Ahmed (2021).

Many of the women interviewed talked about their acceptance of a certain dress code in exchange for being allowed to choose their partners or to gain access to education, work and the public sphere, including joining political parties, student and professional unions, or running for local elections. This is in itself a form of everyday resistance. Hanan from Jordan elaborated on this:

'I began to accept that I would not be able to take off the veil, so I decided to go along with my husband so that I would not be deprived of the rest of my freedoms in political and public activities.' (Hanan, 29, unemployed, Jordan)

There is no doubt that the space for this employing this strategy of 'negotiating with the patriarchy' is greater for gender-conforming women than for trans women, for whom such negotiations are difficult, if not impossible. Given that their bodies are seen as a threat to the gender hierarchy, as discussed earlier, trans women must struggle with patriarchy in all its manifestations just to carve a space for themselves to live. It could be said that trans women are a living embodiment of resistance to patriarchal norms, and a continuous rebellion against the limits and restrictions they impose.

Women from all six countries in the study shared examples of direct resistance to the restrictions placed on them. These included leaving violent relations, especially within their nuclear families, and striving to build an independent life, despite the pain and fear this involved. Some enacted resistance by directly standing up for their rights. Mounira from Tunisia related how she stood up to the university administration where she teaches, to give female students and teachers the right to wear dresses:

'I was one of the first women to wear a dress, and I faced a lot of backlashes, but I made the staff, management, administration and students respect me. Today, wearing a dress on campus is considered very normal.' (Mounira, 35, teacher, Tunisia)

Samira from Egypt insisted on her right to use public transport, regardless of her clothing:

'I saw that private transportation separates me from the street and makes me feel alienated from my community, so I insisted and preferred public transport. Of course, I faced horrified looks and a great deal of harassment. But then I decide, according to my mood, to respond or

ignore. Overall, I felt like I could still stand up and defend myself in a public space.’ (Samira, 31, researcher, Egypt)

Some women adopted more gradual and persuasive methods to try to relax the restrictions on their clothing, especially among their family members. Others saw rebellion against these restrictions as a more appropriate approach. Dalida from Egypt said:

‘When I decided to take off the veil, I approached my mother and told her: “I am taking off the veil, and you have a year to accept it.” At first, I thought that I should get married to hide behind my long-awaited husband to avoid the burden of confrontation. Because once I get married, I will be “my husband’s responsibility”. So, if he agreed for me to take off my veil, no one would be able to force me to wear it. Then I decided that I would take this step now, by myself. I was fully aware of the seriousness of the decision.

‘What encouraged me most to follow through with this decision independently was my anger at my former belief that I needed a man to hide behind. I found that I had to take this step now, since once I get married, I would not be able to do it because it would negatively affect my position in the relationship. This may include my husband’s holding it over my head for him being the one who helped me to take off the veil. I also found that this [getting married to take off the veil] was not at all a compelling reason for me to choose to get involved with someone. This is what prompted me to take this step myself, regardless of whatever happens.’ (Dalida, 25, local NGO worker, Egypt)

Many participants shared personal stories about directly confronting sources of violence against them, whether at the level of the family, society or in public space, despite the dangers and high price this often entailed. Some reported the violence to the police. Layan from Jordan said:

‘I was subjected to a lot of physical and verbal harassment on the street. There was more than one man who harassed me, and I handed them over to the police and imprisoned them. On one occasion, I slapped someone in the street because I am not afraid. This is my personality. I take my rights with my bare hands.’ (Layan, 34, feminist activist, Jordan)

Samira from Egypt expressed the importance of this direct confrontation:

‘It is true that confrontation drains me, but it makes me feel strong, and that I can still defend my space. Not being silent about violence is one of my sources of strength.’ (Samira, 31, researcher, Egypt)

CONCLUSION

The continuous attempt to impose rules of dress and appearance on women, especially by those who are looking for justifications to perpetrate violence against women, costs women physically psychologically and economically. It also limits their participation in the public sphere and reduces their professional and educational prospects. In this study, women shared their strategies for resisting these norms and restrictions and the violence stemming from them. This includes minor acts of daily resistance at home, in the street, and in their places of work and study.

Although these acts of resistance may seem individual or small, sharing them helps women realize that existing gender power structures and prevailing social norms are not set in stone but are subject to change. These everyday acts of resistance have provided and continue to provide a space for women to organize their collective resistance against social pressures, censorship and policing regimes which justify violence against them in various and renewed forms, in both public and private spheres.

Sharing their experiences has built a sense of solidarity and unity, which is itself one of the tools of women's resistance and liberation. As Qamar, a participant from Tunisia, put it: 'We know that we are not alone. Instead of blaming ourselves for the violence we are subjected to, we can see that it is not our fault... and we are not alone in this pain or struggle.'

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