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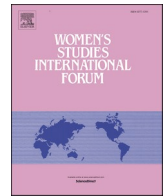
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Standing on top of society's sexist load: Gate-keeping activism and feminist respectability politics in the case of the Iranian MeToo Movement

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ABSTRACT

Over the past three years, Iran has witnessed the birth and growth of an unprecedented movement, whereby countless women have come forward to narrate their experiences of sexual violence. Despite its innovative characteristics and significant accomplishments over a short period of time, academic scholarship has paid little attention to the Iranian MeToo movement to this date. This study aims towards bridging this gap by critically exploring the backlash the movement has generated. Taking a recently published open letter titled 'inner critique' as a case study, it deploys critical textual analysis, combined with a thematic analysis of data driven from in-depth interviews, to unpack the discourses used in the letter by placing them in their historical and material contexts and exposing their relation to pre-existing victim-blaming tropes and rape-scripts. The analysis further sheds light on the classed and gendered respectability politics through which Iranian feminists negotiate status distinctions and reproduce inner hierarchies of power. It concludes by arguing that, rather than offering necessary constructive critique, the open letter builds on and extends the state-backed discourse which depicts feminists as opportunistic agents of foreign political influence, in order to discredit their activism and suppress their radical potential for bringing about transformative change.

1. Introduction

On 16 September 2022, 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman Jina (Mahsa) Amini died in a hospital in Tehran of what is suspected to be a cerebral hemorrhage due to the head injuries she had suffered while being taken into custody by the Iranian morality police only three days prior. Jina's brutal murder sparked the most widespread protests Iran has experienced since the 1979 revolution. The central role assumed by Iranian women, many of whom were younger in age than Jina, and the prioritization of gendered demands as reflected in the movement's adoption of the feminist Kurdish slogan of 'Jin, Jian, Azadi' (woman, life, freedom), has resulted in many dubbing the ongoing uprising as Iran's feminist revolution. This was not the first instance of the infliction of state violence onto Iranian women's bodies in the name of compulsory hijab. In fact, Iranian women have been contesting the imposition of hijab and the systemic undermining of their rights under the Islamic Republic for well over four decades.

The political repression under the Islamic republic and the brutality with which it continues to repress any form of dissent has rendered generations of political dissidents, including many female activists, imprisoned, exiled or even killed. The realities of repression

notwithstanding, Iran has also witnessed the increasing politicization of women's issues which has paved the way for a new feminist consciousness and further activism from the late 1980s up until today (Bayat, 2007, 2013; Mahdi, 2004; Mir-Hosseini, 1996, 2012). Since the mass uprisings in 2009, commonly referred to as the Green Movement (*Jonbesh-e Sabz*), the impactful role of social media in Iranian political activism has become further apparent. Although it has been debated if social media initiated the Green Movement or was limited to organizing and mobilizing protesters, its influence and impact remains undeniable (Mahdavi, 2023). As can be seen in the following years, social media continued to play an important role in the fight for women's liberation and much of Iran's feminist activism has, in effect, shifted into the online sphere since. Cyberspace activism allows Iranian women to create a political identity as feminists while remaining anonymous and avoiding direct state repercussion (Karimi, 2014). Further, engaging in feminist cyber-activism does not require organized planning as one can just post, like and share content to partake in a social movement (Bayat, 2013). At the same time, this can also result in a fragmented movement that prioritizes and markets individual acts of defiance, while failing to address the systemic causes of gendered inequality (Rahbari et al., 2021).

The most recent example of Iranian feminist cyber-activism is the

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emergence of the Iranian MeToo movement in 2020. In August 2020, an Iranian Multimedia news outlet named Ravi (narrator in Farsi), published a short documentary, in which a number of female journalists came forward to share their stories of gender-based violence and sexual abuse at the workplace. The documentary featured seven female journalists, six of whom sat facing the camera, their identities disclosed, in order to share their accounts of sexual harassment, intimidation and abuse. The topic of sexual and gender-based violence in the field of journalism had by no means been a best kept secret. In fact, a few months prior, an Iranian magazine had published a report on workplace sexual harassment at a number of conservative and reformist media outlets, revealing that 90 % of their interviewed sample had experienced sexual harassment at least once while on duty (Dehghani, 2020). Such an act of collective account sharing, however, was unprecedented in that it showcased a defiance on behalf of these women journalists who decided to air their grievances openly, knowing full well the personal and professional consequences that were to follow. It should be noted that this was not the first instance in which Iranian survivors of sexual violence had spoken up. Nonetheless, the brief video functioned as a catalyst for igniting the Iranian MeToo movement, whereby countless Iranian women and gender-queer folk, residing both inside and outside Iran, have come forward to share their intimately personal accounts of varying forms of sexual and gender-based violence. While the majority of these accounts have been shared anonymously online, on Instagram and Twitter, the movement has also inspired dozens of women, including celebrities and public figures such as actress Katayoun Riahi, make-up artist Somayeh Mirshamsi, and most recently actress Baharak Salehnia, to publicly name their abusers on their personal social media accounts.

Unlike many of her foreign counterparts, the Iranian MeToo proved to be more than a short-lived media sensation, and continues to grow in momentum to this date. Dubbed by many as an online movement, it mostly utilizes online tools such as social media platforms to share accounts, expose perpetrators (especially public and high-profile figures) and connect survivors. It has since acquired its own dedicated Instagram and Twitter accounts. Founded by Iranian actress and activist Shaghayegh Norouzi, both accounts are run voluntarily by a collective of anonymous Iranian intersectional feminists that functions as the central de-facto body that collects and publishes accounts, links survivor-narrators to resources (legal, psychological, and otherwise), disseminates knowledge on issues pertaining to sexual violence and gender-based discrimination, advocates on behalf of survivor-narrators, and maintains transnational ties (MetoolranCollective, 2022). Notwithstanding its heavy reliance on online platforms, the movement has also brought about tangible results in the material world, perhaps the most notable of which is the prosecution and conviction of serial rapist Keyvan Emamverdi by an Iranian court in 2022 for the drugging and rape of at least 9 women (Golshiri, 2022).

Despite Iranian MeToo's innovative characteristics and its significant accomplishments over a short period of time, academic scholarship has paid little to no attention to the movement to this date. This is in spite of the fact that the US-based MeToo movement and its global off-springs have been the topic of a wide range of studies since the spark of the transnational movement in 2017. The body of scholarship that directly tackles the Iranian MeToo movement is close to non-existent, with the exception of a recent publication by Kermani and Hooman (2022), who refer to the movement as #rape, instead of its widely-adopted title of 'Iranian MeToo' or 'Man-ham'. The article further does not represent a full picture of the movement, in that it limits its scope to accounts of sexual abuse which are published directly by survivor-narrators on Twitter, thereby excluding (perhaps unwittingly) the thousands of narrated accounts that have been posted anonymously through the central channel of the Iranian MeToo collective on other social media platforms (in particular Instagram). It further erases and renders invisible the role played by the collective (comprised of Iranian women, trans and queer persons, almost all of whom are themselves survivor-narrators

of sexual abuse) in sustaining and nurturing the movement over the past two-three years. This makes explicit the need for feminist analyses that adequately contextualize the Iranian MeToo movement in local and global histories of resistance and defiance, while highlighting the important roles played by those survivor-narrators and narrator-activists who have been at the forefront of the fight against sexual and gender-based violence.

The aim of the present article is to take a first step towards understanding and contextualizing the Iranian MeToo movement, by critically exploring and problematizing the public response it has generated online. In so doing, it contributes towards our understanding of transnational forms of feminist resistance (as well as the backlash faced by them) by exploring the mobilization of feminist networks within the context of the Iranian state. The analysis will reveal a number of tropes which, as I will later argue, are deeply embedded in the *gendered grammar* of the Iranian state and ensure the reproduction of its inherent patriarchal and hetero-sexist structures. Here I am borrowing from and building on Patricia Schor's concept of "racial grammar", which she identifies as a contemporary neoliberal racism that is inherited from colonization and through which the white Western order contains racialized people and their voices (Schor, 2020). The concept of gendered grammar helps me map the lexicon of gendered and sexual semantics which helps sustain the Islam Republic of Iran's gendered ideology through the reproduction of rape culture and materializes in the everyday exertion of sexual violence onto bodies that are gendered, racialized and classed.

The study takes a recently published open letter titled 'inner critique' targeting the Iranian MeToo collective in particular, and the movement more broadly, as its primary case study. It deploys critical textual analysis to unpack the discourses used in the open letter to critique the movement by placing them in their historical and material contexts, exploring their dialectic with consolidated structures of gendered inequality, and exposing their relation to pre-existing victim-blaming tropes and binary understandings of sexual violence. In addition, the article will make use of qualitative interviews with two narrator-activists directly involved in the MeToo movement so as to further inform the discursive analysis, while centralizing the voices and analyses of the protagonists of the movement themselves. My motives in utilizing empirical (qualitative) data driven from semi-structured interviews have been two-fold. Firstly, the empirical data will allow me to critically interrogate, compare and ground the findings of the textual analysis in the bottom-up and practice-driven perspectives of the protagonists. Secondly, reflecting an emic perspective (Pike, 1954), it will help disrupt the academic and societal tendencies towards invisibilizing the (unpaid) labor as well as the intellectual, emotional and material contributions of feminist grass-roots activists.

The structure of the article is as follows. Following a brief reflection on language, particularly questioning the vitality of the term 'survivor' in the MeToo era, the second section addresses the global MeToo movement, critically exploring a number of primary debates surrounding it and mapping common critiques as well as allegations the movement has faced in its various transnational manifestations. Thereafter, the methodological choices made in this study are introduced and substantiated, followed by an analysis section which presents the critical textual analysis of the case study, supported by the empirical data. The fifth and final section synthesizes the analysis, providing concluding remarks and identifying possible avenues for further research.

1.1. A note on language

In this study, I have made the conscious choice of using the term 'survivor-narrator' (*ravi* in Farsi) instead of 'survivor'. While feminist scholarship and everyday discourse have by and large moved beyond using terminology such as 'victim' and 'abused' in favor of 'survivor', the latter also merits critical interrogation especially in the context of the MeToo movement. Those who come forward to share their accounts of

sexual assault are more than survivors. Not only have they survived the violence they experienced, they have actively and agentically taken the step towards sharing their stories and analyses, and in so doing exposing the nature of gender-based and sexual violence and the frequency with which women and LGBTQIA persons experience its varying forms. Survivor, therefore, arguably falls short in capturing the agency and political will of survivor-narrators of sexual violence in the MeToo era.

Before we can delve into a deeper analysis of the responses to the Iranian MeToo, it is crucial to firstly introduce the global context of MeToo activism in which the movement took shape. The next section briefly explores the origins and development of the global MeToo movement in order to establish connections and identify possible parallels that have evolved among its many transnational iterations.

2. Background: understanding challenges and responses to the MeToo movement in the Iranian context

On October 15, 2017, the MeToo movement became a global phenomenon when actress Alyssa Milano encouraged Twitter users to post MeToo if they had experienced sexual harassment or assault to highlight the magnitude of the problem of sexual violence. The phrase "me too", was originally coined by Tarana Burke, a Black woman in the United States, in 2006 when she urged women of color to tag post MeToo on Myspace in order to share their experiences of sexual violence (Lindgren, 2019). A decade later, Milano's invitation was met with unprecedented enthusiasm. Over 12 million users on Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and other social media platforms disclosed having experienced some form of sexual and gender-based violence in their lifetime (Hindes & Fileborn, 2020; Onwuachi-Willig, 2018).

The backlash to the movement came almost immediately. Rhetoric against MeToo erupted as opponents raised a wide range of critique, from concerns of false allegations, questioning survivor-narrators' intentions and the viability of the movement's extra-legal procedures, to challenging the very definition of sexual violence and its boundaries. The movement has hyperbolically been called a 'witch hunt' (Franks, 2019) and a 'trial by media', whereby individuals are publicly 'shamed and blamed' in a rush to judgment (Clarke, 2019). Others have raised concerns about what they deem a 'moralizing discourse' that "evaluates, judges and sanctions, all in one go" (Zarkov & Davis, 2018, 28).

In a comprehensive study published in 2019, legal scholar Jessica Clarke responded to some of the popular backlash to the MeToo movement in the US, particularly in regards to allegations of procedural injustice. Clarke defends the movement's emerging procedural norms against four sets of objections: 1. that they are not enforceable; 2. that survivors who failed to pursue legal remedies have waived their right to complain informally (and extralegally); 3. that MeToo fails to give the accused a fair hearing; and 4. that its consequences are disproportionate to the severity of the misconduct.

The first objection concerns unenforceability: that MeToo does not function on the basis of rules but rather a set of loosely and inconsistently applied informal standards. Here, Clarke argues that reporting on low-profile and high-profile cases within the MeToo movement is in principle justifiable, especially in the US context where survivor-narrators (as well as journalists reporting on their cases) can be sued for libel for making accusations of sexual misconduct (Clarke, 2019). Opponents further argue that enforceability helps screen-out made-up allegations that may be raised out of ill will or ulterior motive. The commonplace concern regarding frivolous or false allegations is in itself embedded in patriarchal stereotypes of gender which delineate strict boundaries for 'appropriate' female sexuality and render women the gatekeepers of heterosexual activity who "bear the onus of sexual communication, choosing whether or not to acquiesce to men's sexual initiatives" (Hindes & Fileborn, 2020, 642). It further reflects and perpetuates rape myths which work to undermine and disqualify the experiences of survivor-narrators of sexual violence. Rape myths are broadly defined here as stereotyped, generalized and false beliefs about

sexual violence, which trivialize, downplay, and even deny experiences of sexual abuse (Franiuk et al., 2008).

The second set of objections posit that those who have failed to officially report cases of sexual assault or/and seek legal relief should not be able to raise their claims unofficially. This argument takes for granted the availability of official and legal infrastructure for reporting and pursuing cases of sexual assault. Rape and sexual assault remain largely unreported, despite their persistence in various global contexts. Survivors of sexual violence may be reluctant to report cases of abuse due to varying reasons, including fear of being disbelieved or even blamed for their experience by law enforcement officials and the legal system (Grubb & Turner, 2012; Gunn & Linden, 1997). The situation is even more complex in Iran where there is no comprehensive legislation that deals with rape directly. In the Iranian legal vocabulary, rape is referred to as *Zena-e be onf va ekrah* (adultery with force and duress), thus falling under the broader category of *Zena* (sex outside marriage). Article 82 of the Iranian Penal Code, subsection 4 outlines *Zena-e be onf va ekrah* as a crime punishable with the death penalty. The law, however, does not recognize marital or intimate partner rape as *Zena-e be onf va ekrah*. It is further important to note that *Zena* itself is a crime punishable with the death penalty in Iran (Aghtaie, 2011). Thus, the categorization of rape under *Zena* underscores the fact that the Iranian legal framework primarily problematizes extra-marital sex (which it deems a direct attack on the patriarchal family structure), as opposed to the issue of sexual violence. *Zena-e be onf va ekrah*, as Aghtaie further posits, only comprises penal penetration into the vagina or anus, leaving other types of coercive and violent sexual acts (including forced oral sex) unaddressed. Additionally, lack of a uniform court procedure as well as the requirement for 'four just men' (or 'three just men and two just women' or 'two just men and four just women' in specific cases) to testify before the judge, render rape cases extremely difficult to prove in court.

Prior to the Iranian MeToo movement, public conversations around sexual violence in the country had remained limited due to an additional set of realities. Next to the existing gaps and shortcoming in the legal framework, official statistics and data regarding reported cases of sexual violence and conviction rates remain nonexistent (Aghtaie, 2011). It is further noteworthy to stress the lack of a Farsi equivalent for the word rape, with the terms *tajavoz* (attack) or *tajavoz-e-jensi* (sexual attack) being the most commonly used synonyms for rape (Aghtaie, 2011). Interestingly but not-surprisingly, another common context in which the term *tajavoz* is often used is in relation to Iranian borders and the territorial integrity of the country (*tajavoz be khak*, meaning an attack on the soil), highlighting the interconnectedness of the notions of patriarchy, the female body and nationalism in the gendered grammar of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In addition, taken for granted assumptions around 'appropriate female sexuality', investment in rape-myths, and binary and patriarchal understandings of gender roles in heterosexual relationships which normalize violence and coercion as an inherent part of hetero-sex, further convolute the discussion around sexual violence, often resulting in survivors being blamed for their experience.

The third category of objections is perhaps the most commonplace one: that MeToo publicly names and shames men without giving them a fair shot at defending (and absolving) themselves. This allegation again overestimates the court's formal and procedural requirement or capacity for providing the accused with such a possibility: "Due process imposes no hard and fast requirements on what constitutes an adequate 'name clearing' hearing, including, for example, whether it must be public, evidentiary in nature, or held prior to deprivation of the liberty or property interest" (Clarke, 2019, 74). Clarke further posits that while career and reputational harm for the accused are relevant, often-times they tend to be overestimated. The court of public opinion does not produce 'final' or long-lasting verdicts, often resulting in the accused (especially high-profile ones) leveraging the public and media attention to litigate their cases. The critique further turns a blind eye to the fact that there is an inverse psychological, reputational, social and professional harm to survivor-narrators that often far outweigh the risks facing the accused,

especially in highly patriarchal contexts such as Iran.

The fourth and final set of critiques concerns proportionality: that the consequences for the accused are not proportional to the severity and the likelihood of the misconduct. However, as Clarke argues, critics tend to overestimate the consequences faced by the accused (especially those who occupy positions of power) and underestimate the consequences for those at the receiving end of sexual violence. Time has shown us that powerful and high-profile men accused of sexual misconduct, by and large, are forgiven and forgotten by the general public. Many have been able to leverage societal tendencies towards victim-blaming to gain further sympathy and support from the public, and some even incorporated the allegations into their artistic and cultural productions. American musician R. Kelly released a nineteen-minute track titled 'I admit' amidst multiple allegations of sexual misconduct (Aswad, 2018). Iranian singer Mohsen Namjoo, accused of multiple accounts of sexual abuse and intimidation, similarly released a song called 'No means no' a few months after an audio-recording was leaked in which he ridiculed and dismissed his accusers, claiming that "No doesn't mean no" and "Any publicity is good publicity" (Shantyaeei, 2021). Iranian painter, Aydin Aghdashloo, sold the most expensive piece of his career shortly after having been accused of sexual assault by more than a dozen women, most of them his former students (ArtForum, 2020).

Clarke further posits that the public outrage regarding (disproportionate) reputational harm to men accused of sexual misconduct does not seem to pay equal attention to the reputational damage faced by many survivor-narrators of sexual violence. A recent study by Garraio et al. compellingly showcases how entrenched patriarchal stereotypes and rape-myths, which have traditionally excused aggressors and blamed survivor-narrators of sexual violence, were reproduced by the Portuguese public so as to garner widespread support for football superstar Cristiano Ronaldo against allegations of rape, brought forth by Kathryn Mayorga. The authors argue that public support for Ronaldo operated through the construction of narrative immunity for the footballer while scrutinizing Mayorga's past actions and questioning her intention so as to cast doubt on the credibility of her testimony in particular, and the online MeToo movement as a whole. The trope of 'false allegations' in this case contributed to depict MeToo as an online movement prone to "the dissemination of unchecked accusations" and "counterproductive in the combat against real rape" (Garraio et al., 2020, 4), ultimately resulting in the creation of a hostile environment towards the MeToo movement in Portugal. Ronaldo went off to enjoy a successful career as one of the most highly-paid football players in the world, while Mayorga was subjected to wide-spread character assassination, portraying her as "a luxury prostitute, who capitalized the #MeToo moment to get even more money from her sexual transaction with Ronaldo" (4). The reputational harm to the survivor-narrator as well as the MeToo movement clearly far outweighed that to the accused in this case.

Another important area which is largely side-lined by the critics of the global MeToo is the so-called 'grey areas' of sexual violence. In her pathbreaking work on the dialectic between discourses and experiences of sexual violence, Swedish feminist scholar Lena Gunnarsson (2018) defines the grey areas of sexual violence as "the experiences at the murky interface of consent and coercion". The phrase thus encapsulates the gaps and tensions that exist between the dominant discourses on sex and sexual violence that posit them as belonging to two entirely different realms of experience, on the one hand, and people's continuum-like experiences of the two on the other. Feminist scholars have for long problematized the existence of dominant 'rape scripts' that depict sexual violence as something monstrous and incompatible with everyday life, while in reality the boundaries between assault and 'ordinary' sexual affairs are blurry and not easily discerned (Ryan, 2011). This is especially the case given the existence of a patriarchal gender logic, which portrays traditional hetero-sex as an exchange in which masculine pursuit and female resistance are both normalized and formalized (Kelly, 2013). The unrealistic discursive depictions of rapists as

'psychopath-monsters' and victim-survivors as 'powerless' thus help reproduce sexual violence in that they cause difficulties in retrospectively understanding one's experience of sexual violence, but also limit one's ability to say 'no' and set boundaries in abusive situations as they are happening or are about to happen (Gunnarsson, 2018). Addressing the representational failure of dichotomous discourses on sex and rape by unpacking the grey areas of sexual violence is thus a necessary step towards combatting the occurrence of sexual violence in its many forms.

3. Methods

This study employs critical textual analysis so as to investigate and interrogate the underlying structures of power and (gendered) ideology in discourses around sexual violence. As mentioned in the previous section, the tension between discourse and practice pertaining to sex and sexual violence has pre-occupied and at times polarized feminist scholarship. The polarization I am referring to here concerns the epistemic divide between, on the one hand, post-structuralist feminist work that destabilizes the ontological category of experience by positing that all experience is discursively constituted, and on the other, realist feminists who posit that sexual violence is a material, not discursive, issue. My approach is more aligned with scholars such as Gunnarsson (2018) and Hindes and Fileborn (2020), who have argued for a middle-ground between the discursive and the realist approaches. Gunnarsson (2018) advocates a 'dialectical' perspective which acknowledges that: "(1) non-discursive processes also shape experiences; (2) even though experiences are partly discursively constituted, the experiential is nonetheless ontologically distinct from the discursive; and (3) experiences are not only constituted by discourses but also resist and shape them." Hindes and Fileborn (2020) go one step further to posit the construction of sexual violence as "situated in the nexus of discourse, corporeal experience, and institutional processes of recognition" (641).

The tension between the discourse and experience of sexual violence, nonetheless, points towards an important fact: that the existing discourses addressing the matter fail to fully represent the reality of sexual violence, a reality which is messy, fluid, and filled with grey areas. This article further contributes towards understanding the discursive representation of the grey areas of sexual violence, by analyzing and unpacking the critical response to the Iranian MeToo movement. It takes a recently published open letter titled 'inner critique' as a case study to investigate the discourses incorporated in the critical response to the movement. The letter was originally published on an online open platform titled Tribune Zamaneh (<https://www.tribunezamaneh.com/>) on 22 August 2022. It comprised of 9 sections which listed a number of over-lapping critiques addressing the shortcomings of the Iranian MeToo movement. As the title 'inner critique' suggests, the open letter positions itself within the Iranian MeToo movement and not in opposition to it. The authors introduce themselves as 'a group of feminist researchers and activists' who have 'for long been pre-occupied with issues and criticisms surrounding the MeToo movement'. The open letter included a list of 118 signatories, among whom known Iranian women's rights activists who are expectedly familiar with, if not well versed in, the discourses on gender-based and sexual violence as well as their anti-feminist backlash. The open letter thus provides a fascinating case study for investigating the discourses utilized in order to scrutinize the movement, and the extent to which these discourses reflect the complex workings of power within the gendered grammar of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The letter was written in Farsi, and translated into English by the author for the purpose of this study. The translated text was then coded and analyzed using critical textual analysis, which allowed for a close interrogation of the meaning and construction of discourses while placing them in the context of underlying (gendered) power structures (Bryman, 2016).

To help bridge the gap between discourse and practice, the article further draws on data driven from semi-structured interviews with two female narrator-activists who are directly involved with the Iranian

MeToo movement. The first informant was Shaghayegh Norouzi, the founder of the MeToo collective (tasked with collecting and publishing narrations of sexual violence and linking survivor-narrators to various channels of support) and the person who is most-commonly credited with having started the Iranian MeToo movement. The second informant, who expressed a preference for anonymity, identifies as a supporter of the movement who works closely with the collective but is not an official member. The interviews were conducted between November 2022 and January 2023 and took place both in-person and online, resulting in a total of 7.5 h of audio recording. The sensitivity of subject-matter of sexual violence and the ethical issues surrounding the discussion of accounts required considering additional measures in line with building rapport and ensuring privacy. The in-person interviews took place in one informant's place of residence in order to maximize both privacy and comfort. The in-person interviews were further conducted over the course of four days, to allow for sufficient breaks and ample reflection. The recorded interviews were then transcribed, translated by the author from Farsi to English, and thematically analyzed.

4. The inner critique: gendered gate-keeping, (de-)politicization and the grey areas of sexual violence

This section presents the results of the critical textual analysis of the open letter, complemented by a close analysis of data driven from in-depth interviews.

The letter opens with a broad introduction of the authors as "*feminist researchers and activists*" who applaud survivor-narrators of sexual violence for their acts of "*defiance*". The authors, nonetheless, express concern regarding "*issues and criticisms*" surrounding the movement, explicitly pointing towards its *procedural* shortcomings which are outlined in nine sections in the remainder of the letter. They further stress having felt the need to "*defend the years-long movement in line with fighting sexual violence, and activists and organizations that have been struggling towards equality, freedom and women's independence for years.*" It is, however, unclear what exactly constitutes the threat from which the movement needs defending; is it the anti-feminist backlash? Or the MeToo movement and its survivor-narrators of sexual violence? I will return to these questions later on in this analysis.

4.1. Class, gender, and ideology: gate-keeping and the politics of respectability

In section one the authors criticize the MeToo movement for having become "*rigid and inflexible*" and "*the absolute property of a few 'owners of the space'*", warning against the "*the dangers of monopolization and identity-seeking*". They continue to share their discomfort with the central role assumed by the MeToo collective in section five by stating that "*It can be scary and terrifying to think that a specific platform is monopolizing the publishing of accounts of sexual abuse*". By referring to the collective's primary role in publishing narrations of sexual violence as 'monopolization', the authors not only problematize the centrality of the collective within the movement but also question its intent and contributions. Constituting the MeToo movement as a "monopoly," the text implies that other activist groups are occluded by the collective. Simultaneously, the language asserts action by informing the public of the danger of monopolization and a lack of inclusivity, while portraying the collective's leaders as exclusionary and elitist. The Oxford dictionary defines monopolization as "*the act or process of taking control of the largest part of something so that other people are prevented from sharing it*". The term thus carries a negative connotation. The repetitive use of the term throughout the text (four times in three sections), showcases the authors' intentionality in emphasizing and criticizing this aspect. However, monopolization only finds meaning in a context where there is considerable power and resources at stake. It would, for instance, be strange to argue that the authors are expressing concern regarding the

monopolization of anti-feminist backlash facing the collective. So, the question that here arises is: what are the resources (material or otherwise) over which the collective enjoys exclusive and monopoly control? The authors continue in section five to posit that:

"This monopolization and placing survivors and their agency under the shadow of certain figures, inadvertently reproduces the hierarchies that create inequality which is fundamentally at odds with the nature and goals of narration and the feminist movement as a whole. It is as if, only the admins of the page, owing to their names, voices, and roles as mediators, get to become the saviors of the abused, the carriers of justice, and independent subjects."

Here the letter specifically points towards the online MeToo page and its administrators, framing their motives as self-interest and criticizing them for undermining the agency of survivor-narrators. This, in turn, is used to question the credibility of the MeToo movement as a whole. It is interesting to note that throughout the letter there is no explicit differentiation between the 'movement' and the 'collective', with the two being used interchangeably especially when the collective's performance and contributions are under scrutiny. The differentiation is, however, made when the authors emphasize their critique of the collective's performance to discredit the movement.

Shaghayegh Norouzi, on the other hand, shares having felt isolated and unwelcome when she first established the MeToo page and published an open call for narrations:

"In relation to the women's movement, what comes to my mind and what I think needs to be named and changed is that it is as if, willingly or not, new faces and their contributions are not meant to be acknowledged or taken seriously. In light of so many factors that we as feminists problematize, women's activists being under pressure, resources being scarce, harsh economic conditions and the unhealthy competition that exists as a result, it is as if we are not meant to welcome new forces into the movement or recognize and validate the effective work that they are doing. I am saying this to let you know that the atmosphere was so heavy in the beginning, that for long I hesitated to claim having started something. That even if you haven't acknowledged it, I have started the Iranian MeToo or at least started a considerable part of it."

What Norouzi describes here is a gate-keeping mechanism which was at play when she first started her work on the MeToo movement. In the quote, she contextualizes this mechanism in broader realities of political repression and scarcity of resources facing Iranian women's activists. In another interview, she similarly contends:

"In the beginning there was no focus on the issue (of sexual violence) and that wasn't the only thing. It was as if there was no space or will even to create such a movement and to collect and direct resources towards it. I remember, and this was right after I had immigrated, I used to spend more than eight hours a day collecting women's narrations, organizing them, publishing them, and writing about them, with the knowledge I had at the time about the issue. And then I would do more research to understand what was happening in other places and to make connections. I really had a full-time job, and a completely voluntary one at that."

Thus, there is seemingly a mismatch between the resources that the authors consider at risk of monopolization versus the material and lived reality of women activists whose voluntary and unpaid labor has kept the movement afloat over the past years. Bahar (pseudo-name), who identifies as a MeToo supporter and works closely with the movement, but is not a collective member, problematized Norouzi's dismissal by the mainstream women's movement stating the following:

"I mentioned Shaghayegh by name because she is someone who has been invisibilized due to a number of reasons. One is because she is not an academic, and this invisibilization has happened even by

some of the feminists that I know and respect, only because she wasn't theoretically in a position where they had wanted her to be. If you remember, in the open letter Shaghayegh Norouzi was not even named. She only gets named when she is accused of getting funding. So, her name gets mentioned when she is attacked and stigmatized but not when she should be credited with having managed this collective, which is extremely difficult and requires so much wisdom regarding knowing what to say where and always putting the survivor-narrators first. She is the working class of this movement because she is doing all the essential hard work, she is the one breaking a sweat, but doesn't really get validated because she doesn't have an academic position."

Referring to Norouzi as the working class, Bahar problematizes Norouzi's dismissal as elitist, highlighting the class-based respectability politics that are at play in the Iranian women's movement. By ascribing to such class politics, Iranian feminists tend to re-enforce the status distinctions among themselves and subsequently reproduce the very hierarchies of power they criticize. The previous two quotes further show that respectability serves a gate-keeping function: only those who can afford the entrance fee are allowed to enter (Harris, 2003). This is observable in the way some activists are awarded credibility and recognition within the movement, while others' contributions are rendered invisible. The classed and gendered respectability politics thus manifest themselves through the invisibilization of women like Norouzi who are perceived to not hold enough 'scene credit' to enter through the gate, and the negation of their voluntary labor as a result.

The gendered aspect of gate-keeping can further be made explicit through the identification of recurring gendered tropes in the open letter that frame MeToo activists as fame-seeking and motivated by personal gain. Examples of such discourse include "identity-seeking" in section one, "placing survivors and their agency under the shadow of certain figures" in section five, "consequently overshadowing the survivors" in section seven. In section two, the authors further state "What we have witnessed over the past two years is that narration has turned into a yellow strategy for recruiting followers in an extremely dichotomous space. This way of reducing a social movement to a personal confrontation between a few specific persons, and the ingestion, digestion and defecation of a social phenomenon by the online media system, turning it into drama-filled news discards that attract a lot of viewers, completely undermines the entire movement". The term "yellow" (zard in Farsi) here references yellow journalism. Like its English counterpart, the term is used in Iran to refer to tabloid and sensationalist media that does not adhere to journalistic standards, particularly in regards to vetting and research, and relies on sensationalization and click-bait headlines to garner attention and increase sales. Referring to the narration process as "ingestion, digestion, and defecation of a social phenomenon", the authors hyperbolically render narrations as human bodily 'waste'. This crude comparison is further accompanied by phrases such as "yellow strategy for recruiting followers" and "drama-filled news discards that attract a lot of viewers" that evoke rape myths which accuse survivor-narrators of fabricating their own assault to gain attention and reduce the movement to an online popularity contest in which "a person's entire social role is reduced to getting/not getting likes". The likening of the MeToo movement to "a personal confrontation between a few" similarly reframes narration as an act driven by ulterior motives such as a personal feud, jealousy and revenge. It also diverts attention away from the systemic nature of the issue of sexual and gender-based violence, reducing it to a matter of private interpersonal conflict.

The allegations of attention-seeking and overshadowing survivor-narrators put forth by the authors of the open letter are further at odds with the functional reality of a collective who so far has worked entirely anonymously, with the exception of its founding member Norouzi. MeToo activists are thus criticized for assuming too much space, while at the same time being dismissed and overlooked by a mainstream feminist movement that deems them undeserving of attention. For

Bahar, such allegations are embedded in patriarchal and sexist societal structures which are themselves reproduced through the ascription of gendered labels to feminist activists:

"To me, a big part of this is because of the sexism and misogyny that is so widespread in this society that render women as constant 'suspects.' Like when a man comes and starts something there could be like two groups who accuse him or label him. These labels are ideological on the basis of the fact that you are saying something that I am ideologically at odds with so you are a traitor or pro-regime or this or that. When it comes to women, the main issue is not even ideological, it is about you being a woman and taking up space so you must be a witch or a whore or have some sort of feminine evil power. So, everything you do gets scrutinized and interpreted through society's sexist lens. If you are dancing, you want to show yourself off. If you have a political analysis and share it loudly, this means that you want attention and want to be famous. If you raise your voice to say no you are aggressive. (...) So, standing on top of society's sexist load and moving against it brings with it such labels and accusations."

Labels, as Bahar rightfully posits, are gendered as well as ideological. The latter can be specifically observed in section six when the authors state that:

"any type of dependence on branded political movements can impact the process of publishing narrations. We deeply believe, given the current characteristics of the online environment, that any type of dependence, on behalf of the platform that publishes narrations, on political organizations, institutions or movements can carry irreversible consequences for the Iranian MeToo movement."

Here the authors of the letter explicitly call for depoliticization of the MeToo movement, arguing that affiliation with political forces will "expose survivors to risks in Iran's current toxic and repressive political environment." This is a problematic line of argumentation for multiple reasons. Firstly, the argument that any inquiry of a feminist nature, let alone one that directly targets a deeply embedded and systemic issue such as gender-based and sexual violence, can be de-coupled from politics is inherently paradoxical. Secondly, this argument is in line with a historical tendency among mainstream waves of Iranian women's activism to opt for a depoliticized and at times compartmentalized (if not reductionist) articulation of their demands so as to appear less threatening to the masculinist political order (Sanasarian, 1982). Such politics of depoliticization might have brought about achievements (albeit tokenistic and surface-level ones) in the short run, but it also resulted in the tightening of the chokehold on feminist activists (particularly those on the political Left), undermining their struggle and reducing the scope and nature of their demands (Paidar, 1997; Sanasarian, 1982).

Thirdly, the argument shifts the responsibility of political repression from the patriarchal state to MeToo activists, blaming them for the dangers facing survivor-narrators and activists inside the country. It further remains unclear what renders a political movement "branded" for the authors of the letter or what comprises the "irreversible consequences" facing the MeToo movement, should it fail to comply. In light of the vague and euphemistic language used, coupled with the workings of historically rooted censorship mechanisms from below in Iranian women's activism, one cannot help but question whether the section is intended to serve as a well-intentioned warning or a continuation of the state-back discourse towards silencing feminist activists and neutralizing the threat of their radical political organization. Returning to the question I posed at the beginning of the analysis section, one can argue that it is this very politicization that renders MeToo the 'threat' from which the authors defend and distance themselves at the beginning of the open letter.

So far, the analysis has rendered explicit a number of discursive tropes at work in the open letter— such as the agency of narrator-

survivors versus the unpaid labor of MeToo activists; the charge of sensationalism as a delegitimizing strategy; the call for depoliticizing the collective; and blaming the collective rather than the Iranian state for the safety threats facing narrator-survivors as well as feminist activists. The next section will further identify discursive strategies deployed in the open letter in line with reproducing dichotomous understandings of sexual violence while simultaneously normalizing and invisibilizing its everyday commonplace manifestations.

4.2. *The grey areas of sexual violence*

The fourth section of the open letter explicitly deals with the various forms of sexual violence, stating that:

“Homogenizing experiencing of sexual violence can result in the normalization and undermining of the more extreme and systematic forms of sexual violence. Undoubtedly, the least significant examples of abuse at the bottom of the pyramid of violence can have long-lasting and damaging effects on people. Nonetheless, whether we take as our reference the laws ratified in advanced judicial systems (such that some accounts have referred to them, not that they are our reference) or current feminist debates on sexual violence, the various stages of sexual violence namely rape, sexual deceit and fraud, physical and verbal forms of sexual abuse cannot bear the same punishment. When a serial rapist who has abused their position of power or a psychologist or a doctor who has assaulted their vulnerable patient, gets equally exposed and punished as a person who has committed a one-off and milder form of abuse, more than making the space unsafe for abusers, we have reduced the price of committing systematic forms of violence.”

Here, the authors clearly present a hierarchal order pertaining to various forms of sexual violence, ranking them from “one-off and milder form(s) of abuse” to “more extreme and systematic forms of sexual violence”, arguing that the low-ranking forms of violence should not bear the same punishment as high-ranking ones. This line of argumentation places public sympathy largely with the abusers instead of survivor-narrators, portraying the former as the ultimate ‘victims’ of the MeToo movement while minimizing the heavy consequences borne by the latter, both owing to their experiences of sexual violence as well as the decision to come forward about them. It further reproduces rape scripts and binary depictions of sexual violence which normalize ‘milder’ forms of abuse as an inherent part of hetero-sexual relations, while portraying ‘real’ sexual violence as outrageous and exceptional acts committed by a few bad men. Contrary to what the authors posit, “the less significant forms of abuse”, in other words the grey areas of sexual violence which pervade the daily lived experiences of women, trans and queer folk in Iran, are themselves everyday systemic iterations of the very hetero-patriarchal structures that produce, and are in turn produced by, varying forms of sexual and gender-based violence.

Moreover, the consequences borne by those accused of sexual violence as part of the Iranian MeToo movement seem to be overstated by the authors. With the exception of Keyvan Emamverdi, abusers exposed by the Iranian MeToo by and large continue to benefit from a social, political, and judicial system that shields them from liability for their own wrongdoings. MeToo survivor-narrators, on the other hand, face compounded challenges at various stages of publicizing their accounts of sexual and gender-based violence. Norouzi relatedly shares:

“The biggest challenge in regards to narration is the war that takes place between the survivor-narrator and society. This is in fact the war between the survivor-narrator and the victim-blaming culture. I think many survivor-narrators have won this battle in the Iranian MeToo movement. But this remains a huge battle. It is a common belief that if survivor-narrators share their accounts anonymously, they will be protected and it is like that to a certain extent. But in many cases, it is not. The abuser can still figure out the identity of the

survivor-narrator. Any sentiment of sexism and male-centrism and victim-blaming can then be used to recruit people against the survivor-narrator, regardless of whether they know the survivor-narrator directly or not, as it is the case with the comments people leave under the posts. Or the abuser can approach the survivor-narrator or start publicly sharing personal things about them in order to pressure them. So, this is one of the main challenges of narrating and you consciously know that you are entering into this war. MeToo knows this and so does the survivor-narrator and we enter into this battle together. And each time you say okay I need to fight until my last breath so that I can come out of this with my head held high.”

Norouzi here underscores the challenges MeToo survivor-narrators have to face upon publication of their accounts, emphasizing that even in cases where survivor-narrators share anonymously, they are still at risk of reputational and material harm. There have been multiple cases in the Iranian MeToo movement where abusers retaliated against anonymous survivor-survivor-narrators with what could be considered online defamation campaigns. A notable example of this was Navid Yousefian, a serial abuser accused of at least three accounts of pro-longed sexual and psychological abuse, who not only publicized the identity of his anonymous survivor-narrators online but went so far as to leak a recorded phone conversation in which one survivor-narrator is seemingly interrogated by an intelligence officer of the Iranian regime. In another case, Iranian actor Habib Rezaei and actor-director Mehdi Kooshki, each accused of multiple accounts of rape, sued Iranian actresses Taraneh Alidoosti and Shabnam Farshadjoo for libel, on the ground that they had shared posts on social-media containing the allegations. While Rezaei and Kooshki lost their libel suit against the actresses, the case shows the measures abusers are willing to take in order to remain in control of the narrative and compel survivor-narrators into silence.

The authors go further in section eight to avers that “Every person who is accused of sexual violence, must have the possibility to speak (...) We need a process which grants the accused the possibility to defend himself and to protect his dignity against accounts that claim to damage it.” The authors then continue to task the MeToo collective with providing a platform for the accused so as to redeem themselves:

“If an accused person requests the chance to restore their dignity and wants to defend and explain themselves, MeToo must think of creating a structure whereby the words of the accused can also be heard, while being mindful of the situation and viewpoint of the abused and of course protecting their safety. Such an approach can help protect the survivors from the possible vengeful actions of the accused, such as revealing the identity of the survivor (and other threats and hurtful and intimidating behaviour towards the survivors and the movement as a whole).”

The assumption that the accused do not have access to platforms for defending and redeeming themselves is naïve at best. As the two previous examples have shown, abusers enjoy access to and make use of an abundance of platforms to make their cases heard, including social-media platforms, official media outlets in high-profile cases and even court rooms as was the case with Rezaei and Kooshki. Moreover, by urging the MeToo platform to echo the voices of those accused of sexual violence so as to discourage them from seeking revenge, the authors again misplace the responsibility of perpetrators’ vengeful behaviour, and the traumatic consequences this carries for the health and safety of survivor-narrators, onto the MeToo collective, instead of holding accountable those who commit these acts of violence and retaliation in the first place.

5. Conclusion

The present study was an attempt towards understanding and

problematizing the backlash against the Iranian MeToo movement by conducting a critical textual analysis of an open letter titled 'Inner Critique' published in 2022 by a group of self-proclaimed feminist researchers and activists in which they criticized the movement's normative and procedural shortcomings in nine sections. The results of the critical textual analysis were complemented by a thematic analysis of data driven from in-depth interviews with two protagonists of the Iranian MeToo movement so as to bridge the gap between discourse and practice while centralizing the voices of those at the fore-front of the struggle towards combatting sexual and gender-based violence in Iran.

The analysis helped bring into light the classed and gendered respectability politics at play in the Iranian women's movement through which Iranian feminists negotiate and define their status distinctions and reproduce inner hierarchies of power. The politics of respectability further serve a gatekeeping function, rendering as 'outsiders' those who do not possess the required capital to enter, or who fail to conform to the behavioral and ideological norms of the space. It further showed how respectability politics materialize in the ascription of gendered labels to women's activists, portraying them as self-interested, over-bearing, and attention-seeking individuals who monopolize resources for personal gain. Highlighting the mismatch between the discursive depictions of MeToo activists as materially privileged 'owners of the space' and the experiential reality of an anonymous collective, comprised of female, trans, and queer narrator-activists working voluntarily both in exile and inside Iran, I have argued that such labels are gendered as well as ideological, simultaneously deriving from and feeding into a gendered grammar which has historically manifested itself in the establishment of censorship mechanisms from below in Iranian women's activism, undermining their transformative potential for political organization.

The analysis further contributes towards our understanding of the discursive representation of sexual violence, particularly its grey areas, by rendering explicit the prevalence of rape-myths as well as rape scripts in the backlash against the Iranian MeToo movement. Using discourse that depicts 'real' sexual violence as extreme instances in rare 'stranger danger' scenarios, the open letter exacerbates the divide between the discourse and continuum-like experiences of sexual violence, further undermining the systemic nature of the experiences which fall within the grey areas of sexual violence and the important role they play in sustaining and reproducing patriarchal structures. It repeatedly questions the credibility of narrations, placing public sympathy with the accused while minimizing the hefty consequences borne by those who disclose their experiences of sexual and gender-based violence as part of the MeToo movement.

In light of what was outlined above, I argue that rather than offering necessary constructive critique, the open letter builds on and extends the state-backed discourse which depicts feminist activists, especially those in exile, as opportunistic agents of foreign political influence, in hopes of discrediting politicized feminist movements such as the MeToo and suppressing the radical potential they carry for bringing about structural change. Throughout this article, I have defended the Iranian MeToo movement against a variety of allegations. However, the movement will undoubtedly benefit from continued intersectional feminist questioning and critique in order to reach its full transformative potential. A limitation of the present analysis was that it explored one particular case (a collective critical response in the form of an open letter) rather than a larger discursive sample of critiques facing the Iranian MeToo movement. While the findings are in no way generalizable, the analysis serves as a starting point for the systemic interrogation of the politics of resistance to feminist activism in the Iranian context. Further research is required to understand the particularities of the Iranian MeToo movement so as to identify its shortcomings and areas for improvement. Research and practice on the subject can further greatly benefit from studies that comparatively analyze transnational iterations of the MeToo movement, especially those in contexts less-researched, in order to identify similarities and bring into light the important lessons they carry for one-another as well as the transnational feminist fight for ending

gender-based and sexual violence once and for all. In the words of Shaghayegh Norouzi, "when women narrate, miracles unfold."

Declaration of competing interest

The author report there are no competing interests to declare.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102765>.

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