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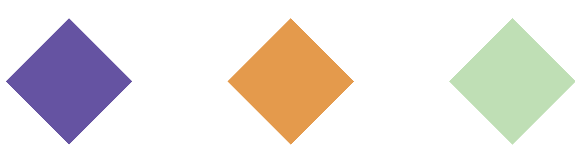
# Gendered Resistance



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## NAY EL RAHI

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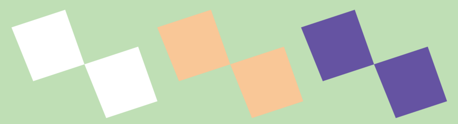


# Sexual Harassment and The Connective Self: Her Shame is Their Shame

**It was Eid. Naziha and her family were visiting relatives in their hometown in Bekaa, Eastern Lebanon. A man, a distant family friend, comes into the room; a man "from outside our group", from "a different environment", with "nothing in common with us", Naziha recounts, emphasizing his conservative nature. The man shakes Naziha's hand and pulls her close to kiss her cheek, singling her out of all the women in the room, a remarkably odd behavior from a man who "never really hangs out with women, nor does he have any women friends". This incident happened five years ago, but still makes Naziha cringe in shame to this day. Seconds after this unpleasant encounter, Naziha felt extremely uncomfortable and left the room. "Everybody noticed that I was upset, four of my female relatives came after me urging me to not make a big deal out of the issue and come back in," she continues. Naziha stressed that what made her uncomfortable was that she did not authorize this familiarity with which the man interacted with her. The boundaries that this man, who comes from a different group, environment, and mentality, overstepped, were those of the group of people that Naziha belongs to in the context of the story, "our group". He was an "outsider".**

## Introduction

Much of our understanding of sexual harassment as scholars and activists comes from established theories often leading to ineffective interventions. Overlooked in much of the mainstream feminist theorizing are the various ways that different constructs of the self, such as the connective self – dominant in the Arab world – understand and experience sexual harassment.

By exploring how Lebanese women living in Beirut understand and define sexual harassment in relation to their notion of selfhood, how they talk about experiences of bodily discomfort in public spaces, and how their socialization as connective selves in the gendered and aged hierarchy of their families shape their understanding of it, this article is a call to look beyond the obvious understanding of sexual harassment and to rethink the language used to discuss it.

The narratives of Beirut-based Lebanese women about bodily discomfort in public spaces reveal their understanding and experience of sexual harassment as defined not by the transgression of their individual boundaries and limits, but by the infringement of the boundary of a collective that they belong to – as a couple, group of friends, or community. This understanding is a direct reflection of their position as connective selves in Suad Joseph's patriarchal connectivity paradigm. Connective selfhood is a construct of a relationally-oriented self with fluid boundaries. Coupled with patriarchy, "connectivity organizes these selves in a gendered and aged hierarchy, within a culture that valorizes kin structures, morality, and idioms" in all relations (Joseph 1993b, 453).

The women's narratives also explicitly point to emotions ranging from confusion to disgust, shock, and shame – dwelling particularly on shame – while avoiding to label these encounters as "sexual harassment", and invalidating the perpetrators' sexual purposes.

This reluctance to use the term "sexual harassment" is coupled with a hesitation to complain about these invasive encounters altogether, because complaining in the context of sexual harassment makes something bigger than it needs to be, and makes the women complaining perceive themselves as bigger than they are (Ahmed 2019); so, they refrain from complaint to avoid this magnified attention, and pretend that it did not happen.

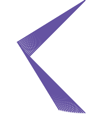
I use Sara Ahmed's sociality of emotions model to read these emotions-centered narratives and locate the intersection of the two chapters of the women's narratives – their understanding, and their expression – which is their communities. Just like the harassment they encounter does not target them as individuals isolated from their intimate others, their emotions about it are felt collectively and circulate through their peers, kin, and non-kin in their communities. Shame – like connectivity – binds us to others in how we are affected by our failure to "live up to" those others we love; a failure that must not be made explicit, and that must be seen as temporary in order to re-allow us to re-enter the family or community. Individual shame is bound up with community precisely because the ideals that have been failed are the ones that "stick" others together (Ahmed 2014).

Guided by the patriarchal connectivity paradigm, I propose an approach for addressing this issue in our context that directs our attention to how conditions and relations of connectivity shape women's experiences and understandings of discomfort and violation, often read as "sexual harassment".

# Context

The question of how Lebanese women living in Beirut experience sexual harassment in relation to their construct of selfhood stems from a previous study conducted in 2017 that looked into what constitutes sexual harassment to men and women in Beirut.

Stunningly, when deciding whether an incident is sexual harassment or not, the women across the three focus groups conducted then, reported thinking that the perpetrators' intentions matter more than their own experience or feelings when it comes to defining sexual harassment. They were less likely to consider any act as sexual harassment if they believed that the harasser, often a stranger, did not mean it as such, despite feeling uncomfortable or unsafe. While discussing their experiences in these focus groups, the women zoomed in on how they felt, spoke of discomfort, and highlighted feelings like shame, embarrassment, and disgust, while stripping perpetrators of their sexual motives and avoiding to label these encounters as "sexual harassment". They emphasized how they experienced these encounters in their bodies, and invited others into this experience by assuming the perpetrators' intentions in their definition and understanding of it.



**Much of our understanding of sexual harassment as scholars and activists comes from established theories often leading to ineffective interventions**

This pronounced rupture between the language that scholars, activists, and professionals use to discuss sexual harassment on the one hand, and the language women use to describe their own experiences on the other, alienates them from their intimate, lived realities, and keeps the discussion in the theoretical sphere; something people know cognitively, but do not relate to, and often lack the tools to communicate and explain.

It is this revealed rupture that led to reframing the research question, by substituting the term "sexual harassment" with words women use, and a language that centers the inquiry around them,

and their narratives, emotions, understandings, and expression. These findings led to forging the link between these emotions on the one hand, and the connective self, a construct of a relationally-oriented self with fluid boundaries, on the other.

# Methodology

Naziha is one of twenty-three women I met in the context of fieldwork conducted between April and October 2019, seeking to explore how Lebanese women living in Beirut understand their experience of sexual harassment in public spaces in relation to their construct of selfhood.

I used the snowball sampling technique to reach the women who participated in focus groups and in-depth interviews. The sample of the women reached had flexible parameters. The only two characteristics kept for all focus groups are university-level education, and the above-30 age range. Insisting on keeping the university-level education characteristic is to test a common running assumption that women with university-level education are more likely to learn about the concepts and definitions of sexual harassment, and will necessarily recognize and identify their discomfort as sexual harassment. The above-30 age range was also kept because overwhelmingly, literature on sexual harassment had targeted the younger age group (18-25) or (18-30), either students or women in the early years of their careers. The perception and experience of women above 30 have rarely been explored.

Three focus groups were conducted – one gathered three married, employed women in their thirties; a second assembled eight educated married women above 50 years of age and gathered both employed and unemployed women; and a third brought together four employed, practicing Muslim women, and gathered both single and married women. Eight in-depth interviews were also conducted with single and married employed women on a spectrum of social conservatism.

The interviews and focus groups explored four levels: the respondents' assessment of different scenarios of sexual harassment from the 2017 study, their own experiences of discomfort in public spaces, respondents' assessment of perpetrators and their perpetrator, and selfhood and on the dynamics within the women's own families.

The narratives coming out of this fieldwork responded to three hows: how women experience and understand sexual harassment, how they define it, and how they communicate about it.

On the level of how they experience sexual harassment, respondents consider the most bothersome encounters in public spaces as those violating not their individual boundaries, but that of the collective or community they belong to – like their couple, group of friends, or faith. The focus group of older women remarked rather interestingly that a few decades ago, comments from strangers in the streets were never frowned upon, and were welcomed as "part of our culture", and "a demarcation of our beauty and feminine presence", which is a reflection of how a shift in the concepts of privacy and personal space led to the framing of these same encounters as invasive today. A link was detected between the respondents' understanding of harassment as the violation of the collective's boundaries, and between some of their views on family dynamics, and the necessity of prioritizing the elders and carrying them through at the end of their lives, often at the expense of their personal choices like getting married or moving out.

In terms of how they define it, respondents talk about the criteria and conditions that confirm whether situations of discomfort qualify as sexual harassment. If the perpetrator does the acts in

question exclusively to one woman, singling her out from others, it is considered harassment; but if he does it to others, "it is normal", and "just the way he acts". Similarly, if the perpetrator does this act in public, or is witnessed by others, his act is much less likely to be regarded as sexual harassment than if it was done when the perpetrator was alone with the woman. Another defining factor of sexual harassment for respondents is the sexual intent manifested in the explicitness of the words, looks, and inferences made; and it was the women's duty to decipher this.

On the level of communicating sexual harassment, when discussing incidents of discomfort in public spaces, respondents avoid uttering the words "sexual harassment", replacing it with statements like "trespassed boundaries", or "acted inappropriately". Respondents not only use the language of boundaries to talk about these incidents, but also frame them in terms of emotions, dwelling particularly on the feelings of disgust and shame.

This evasion of the sexual nature of the transgression, and the women's hesitation to call it harassment across the two studies has multiple meanings. They may be reluctant to use this term because they're ashamed – of the possibility that harassment might have truly happened, or of the situation of harassment itself – and this shame is an emotion that the women explicitly point to. They may refrain from calling the situation sexual harassment because acknowledging it makes it real, and when it is real, it has to be faced; or possibly because a grave violation like this could not possibly be perpetrated by a fellow community member, and so to amount to sexual harassment, it should be perpetrated by an other – an outsider.

In this article, I will elaborate on two of these issues: the first is the women's understanding of their discomfort and harassment as an infringement on the collective's boundaries in light of the connective selfhood paradigm, and the second is the words that they use, and the emotions they bring up when talking about these situations.

# Theoretical Coupling: Connective Selfhood and the Sociality of Emotions

'Connective selfhood' is a term coined by anthropologist Suad Joseph in 1993 to describe the fluid and situated character of the self among Arab families where selves see intimate others as extensions of themselves. This construct of selfhood produces selves that invite, require, and initiate involvement with others in the shaping of itself; selves that neither expect nor value autonomy or separateness. It refers to a culturally normative pattern of significant male and female relationships, center-stages familial relations, and links familial and non-kin dynamics in historically, culturally, socially, politically, and economically specific contexts. Although modeled in and by familial relationships, connectivity extends throughout relationships of significance in the Lebanese society, via idiomatic kinship, so non-kin persons could evoke the legitimacy and expectations of kin relationships in all spheres (Joseph 1993, 3-4).

**'Connective selfhood' is a term coined by anthropologist Suad Joseph in 1993 to describe the fluid and situated character of the self among Arab families where selves see intimate others as extensions of themselves**

Coupled with patriarchy, connectivity organizes the selves with "fluid boundaries in a gendered and aged hierarchy in a culture that valorizes kin idioms" in all relations (Joseph 1993b, 453). Because of this family-embedded patriarchy, men and elders are entitled to direct the lives of women and juniors, and

are authorized to enter the boundaries of the self of others more than women and juniors – to regulate, supervise, and mold. Patriarchal connectivity is hence essential not only to differentiate masculine and feminine experiences, but also to understand the shaping of relationality in a system of domination (Joseph 1993, 7-8).

I combine this feminist theory of selfhood with mainstream feminist theories of sexual harassment, and the sociality of emotions model to produce a localized, historically specific analysis of sexual harassment particular to the Lebanese context.

Sexual harassment, broadly defined based on Catharine MacKinnon's feminist legal scholarship, refers to the "unwanted imposition of sexual requirements in the context of a relationship of unequal power" (MacKinnon 1979, 10). MacKinnon's scholarship, built on sexual harassment cases in the workplace in the US, allowed sexual harassment to be seen as a dynamic that reinforces women's traditional and inferior role in the labor force and society, posing sexism at the heart of this issue. MacKinnon's theory remains one of the most well-known feminist theories of sexual harassment, even in the countries that lack sexual harassment legislation. However, though almost paradigmatic, this theory barely steps outside the domain of legislation of individual rights. By establishing sexual harassment as an actionable offense, MacKinnon's contribution paved the way for the proliferation of literature and interventions on the issue that evoke a litany of legal terminologies that might be restrictive and exclusionary of countless grievances, and that might not resonate with women in many parts of the world.

Most definitions emanating from this paradigm rely heavily on the notion of unwanted sexual attention, comments, contact, and behavior typically directed toward women by men. The act's unwanted nature assumes autonomous subjects, with strict boundaries, separate desires and needs, and contractual relationships. This definition of sexual harassment as it stands today is predicated on the individualist construct of the self, which is not a universal construct of the self; which in turn makes this definition incongruent with many contexts, particularly in the Global South.

In the existing literature on the experience of women in the Arab world with sexual harassment, this definition remained largely unchallenged, presuming that women in the Arab world understand boundaries, and learn and construct their desires as distinct of others' the same way individual selves do. This definition has hence failed to capture the vocabulary around sexual harassment against selves with fluid boundaries.

This research started with the purpose of putting together an organic, locally-grown vocabulary around sexual harassment specific to the Lebanese context. It was the women's emotions-centered narratives that lead me to deconstruct the emotional language that the women use to discuss these incidents.

I use Sara Ahmed's sociality of emotions model to read these narratives, a reading that helps locate the intersection of the two parts of their stories – their understanding and their expression, which is their communities. Emotions are dynamic social constructs that work by aligning subjects with collectives, designing an "us" pitted against an "other".

Systematically influenced by social inequalities, emotions act as gateways into the material world, serve as markers that help people navigate their world, and create the surfaces and boundaries that allow communities to distinguish their inside from their outside (Ahmed 2014, 10-13).

## Sexual Harassment as Assault on the Community

Though the data collected for this research includes over twenty women and countless stories, I choose

to focus on the narratives of three women - Rania, Naziha, and Maha, because their stories are the most reflective of an understanding of sexual harassment that center-stages the community, and prioritizes this community in the assessment of what qualifies as harassment and what does not.

Sipping on her orange juice, 37-year-old Maha, a working mother of two, recalls a New Year's Eve she spent with her husband and another couple, at their long-time friends' – also a married couple, a few years back. All through the evening, Maha kept trying to evade their host's looks, until she went to the hallway mirror to fix her veil. He followed her and blocked her way back, only to whisper "you drive me crazy". She stood still, horrified at the cringe-worthy words this "family friend" just uttered. It took seconds for her to finally regain her composure and hiss a threat back at him, "You have one second to move out of my face, and if this happens again, I'll tell your wife." He backed off. "I was disgusted," she recounts.

Maha's best friend Rania, a 42-year-old working mother of three, recounts disturbing encounters at work. Rania's middle-aged co-worker is "usually friendly to everyone". Being the only man in the department, he was especially courteous with the women. He used to wait for Rania almost every day at the stairs to hand her a red rose. At first, she thought "this is how he is, just kindness". As the days went by, the co-worker not only persisted in his behavior, but also became more aggressive. He started blocking Rania's way up and down the stairs to the office, insisting on getting a kiss on the cheek that she consistently refused to give him. "I'm a married woman and you know it!" she would repeat. "It was shocking and embarrassing," she reflects.

Maha remembers another "incredible" story. Her parents still live in their hometown, where she visits them regularly with her husband and children. "Our neighbors had their only kid late in their marriage, he is at least ten or fifteen years younger than me," she narrates. Maha even remembers buying him candy daily coming back from university when he was still a kid. "As a young man, he started talking to me differently," she continues. Last year, Maha and her family visited her parents who had their neighbors over for Eid dinner. As they were setting the table, the young neighbor comes up to Maha and declares upfront: "One look into your eyes is worth all the women I fucked," astounding her into utter silence. "My husband and my whole family were there, I could not fathom his audacity," she comments. "I was shocked, disgusted, and ashamed."

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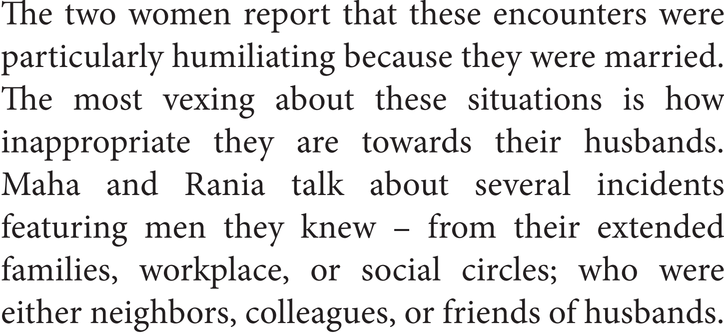


The two women report that these encounters were particularly humiliating because they were married. The most vexing about these situations is how inappropriate they are towards their husbands. Maha and Rania talk about several incidents featuring men they knew – from their extended families, workplace, or social circles; who were either neighbors, colleagues, or friends of husbands.

What made Rania, Maha, and Naziha uncomfortable in a public space, is not behavior perpetrated by a stranger in the street, rather, "unacceptable and inappropriate" actions committed by a man they know. Their narratives make it abundantly clear that at the heart of their discomfort lies one difficult reality: that these transgressions took place in semi-public spaces – the workplace or friends' homes – by men they know, men they see every day, in their social circles; and this triggered emotions ranging from confusion to disgust, shock, and shame. The distress running through the three women's stories

and felt by each is caused by a transgression of boundaries, an overstepping of limits. However, and while these invasive encounters might have happened to them as individual women, they are experiencing it as a transgression of the collective to which they belong – the married couple or the group of friends. This transgression of the collective boundaries seems to also be how they define sexual harassment. This push of the limits, this infringement of boundaries was not only perceived as an overstepping on the individual women's limits, but more importantly, as a tug at their imagined communities' boundaries. The perpetrators are seen not only as targeting the women as individuals, but also as attacking their communities through them. It is almost as if they consider an incident to be sexual harassment only if it includes this element of collective boundary transgression.

This perception happens to be a direct reflection of their position as women in the aged and gendered hierarchy of their families under patriarchal connectivity. Women's focus is redirected away from their own individual experience, and their kin and community are blended into their understanding of their experience, when their selves' boundaries extend to include intimate others.

## The Emotional Script of Sexual Harassment

Maha, Rania, and Naziha's narratives highlighted feelings of disgust, discomfort, and shame; and explicitly linked these feelings – specifically in the case where the perpetrators were friends of their husbands – to the relationship that they will strain if they reacted or spoke up. This could be read as a manifestation of women's role as nurturers in the relational web. It seems to be the women's obvious but unspoken duty to keep bonds tight and relations intact, even if this comes at the expense of their own comfort and well-being. In an insightful article on the process of complaint, Sara Ahmed discusses how complaining in the context of sexual harassment makes something bigger than it needs to be, and makes the women complaining perceive themselves as bigger than they are (Ahmed 2019); so, they hesitate to complain to avoid this magnified attention, and to be able to pretend that nothing happened. Perhaps the most telling detail of Naziha's story is how her female relatives were the ones rushing to ask her to keep quiet and "not to make a big deal out of the situation", not to object, not to make herself bigger, not to become a problem. For the relatives, Naziha's reaction was seen as forceful, she was probably perceived as "intense", as if the reaction she made was what brought the violence into existence and forced her community to face it when it's often dealt with by not being faced (Ahmed 2019).

For those who received the complaint – the relatives, who witnessed Naziha's reaction of instantly leaving the room, it was the complaint that alerted them to the violence she had faced, not the incident itself, which they had also witnessed. This is how Naziha, the plaintiff, the wronged, became the problem because of what she did not put up with, what she tried to hold in but couldn't.

It feels that the hesitation to complain is compounded when the perpetrator is a "family friend", or a "kind colleague". Male and elders not only expected females and juniors to read their minds and prioritize their needs, but also apparently to preserve their cherished relationships regardless of the costs. This expectation normalizes the invasive behavior, and this normalization in turn, renders the behavior unremarkable. This unremarkability – how others are not only not objecting to it, or showing signs of objecting, but also expecting no complaint about it – is exactly what makes the women wonder whether what has happened is not objectionable after all (Ahmed 2019), or whether this barely-objectionable gesture is worth wrecking an intimate other's significant relationship. Perhaps this is why women avoid using the term sexual; because an offensive act of a sexual nature coming from outside the community's boundaries will most definitely trigger

a reaction from the patriarchs of the community, and will likely lead to severing the ties between the two communities.

With the tool of complaint proving difficult, and their ability to express – squeeze a complaint out – constrained by so many others to look out for, the sites where all the women's complaints are stored remain their bodies. It is then not surprising that women's narratives about what bothered them in invasive encounters in public spaces are centered on bodily reactions and emotions. Emotion, bodily sensation, and cognition are intertwined, and emotions involve both cognition and bodily sensations (Ahmed 2014, 14). However, the emotions that the women talked about to describe their invasive encounters are not exclusively theirs, just like the harassment they encountered did not target them as individuals isolated from their intimate others. Their emotions were felt collectively and circulated through their peers, kin, and non-kin in their communities.

## Her Shame Is Their Shame

Zooming in on the stories allows us to see that the dominant theme of all three stories is shame; shame that also triggered disgust, shock, and anger. The emotion of shame is particularly relevant to the discussion of connective selves understanding their experiences as collective. It has been extensively argued that shame is a form of nation-building, and that declarations of shame have the capacity of bringing a nation into existence as a "felt community" (Ahmed 2014, 118). While this does not mean that women cannot feel shame individually, it certainly confirms that shame brings people together, shapes their communities, and pits these communities against others.

Though shame has been described as "an intense and painful sensation bound by how the object feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body", it is also evident that shame does not isolate subjects, and is a collective feeling par excellence: "Our shame is 'my shame' insofar as I am already 'with' them, insofar as the 'our' can be uttered by me" (Ahmed 2014, 116-118). Also pertinent is how shame attaches the subject to its self, as it intensifies the subject's relation to itself, or its sense of itself as self, as it cannot be an isolated act that can be detached from the self (Lynd 1958, 50). When the self is connective, many others are within its boundaries, which complicates and further intensifies the relation with the self when ashamed. Thinking of complaint in this context further muddles the situation. Women refrain from complaining about sexual harassment not only for fear of inviting attention, but also because this public complaint will make their shame explicit and visible, and as connective selves, this would mean making their intimate others' shame explicit and visible.

**When feeling shame, a woman reveals to herself that she is a failure through the gaze of an ideal other**

Further, shame is an emotion that requires witness – the imagined view of the other that is taken on by the subject (woman) in relation to herself. When feeling shame, a woman reveals to herself that she is a failure through the gaze of an ideal other. As a connective self, she is revealing this failure to herself and to her intimate others. When shamed, her community acts as both the revealed to – alongside herself, and the mirror through which this failure is revealed. This ideal self – that serves as an echo of failure in shameful situations – is produced as a self that belongs to a community; a proximate "we"; a community (Ahmed 2014, 105).

Shame is felt as a result of failure to approximate an ideal that has been given to us through the practices of love, and what is exposed through this shame is the failure of love (Ahmed 2014, 106). I would extend this in the context of shamed connective selves to argue

that what is revealed in shame is failure to protect this ideal self/community, and its bonds with other communities that a sexual harassment complaint threatens to break. This shame confirms women's love for their communities. The intertwining of love and shame evokes the discussion of women's submission to the needs and desires of the elderly males in their families under patriarchal connectivity. Often, women are happy in their situations, gladly heeding demands, perceiving this as a practice of love to ones who are closer to the self than itself.

Shame – like connectivity – binds us to others in how we are affected by our failure to "live up to" those others we love (Ahmed 2014, 108); a failure that must be witnessed – like Naziha was – and seen as temporary in order to re-allow us to re-enter the family or community; and, I would add, preferably not faced or made explicit so as not to make it bigger. Individual shame is bound up with community precisely because the ideals that have been failed are the ones that "stick" others together.

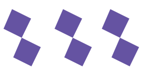
# Final Thoughts

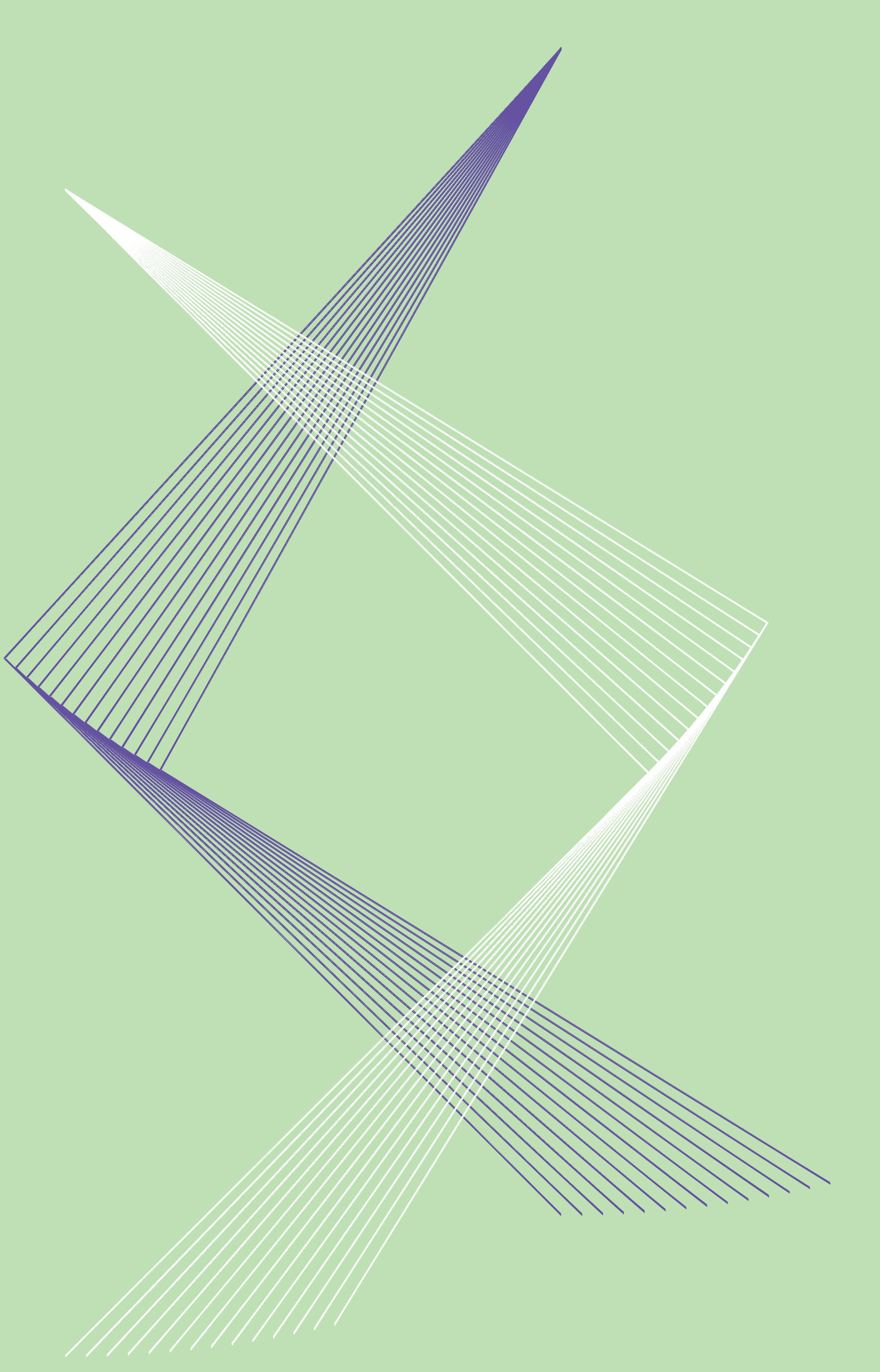
The patriarchal connectivity paradigm developed in 1993 to explain how both men and women are socialized to have fluid boundaries and be extensions of their kin, and how Arab families are organized in aged and gendered hierarchies, reveals why women experience instances of discomfort and insecurity in public spaces as an assault on their communities.

This fluidity of boundaries that turns them into extensions of the males and elders in their communities, lead women to centralize their bodies and emotions while framing and expressing their complaints of these transgressions. By doing so, and since emotions are felt collectively according to the model of the sociality of emotions, women have transformed their bodies into sites of collective affective tension.

A similar note was echoed in a small-scale research study from HarassTracker in Lebanon in 2017, exploring women's understanding of sexual harassment. The study confirmed women's tendency to trust the assessment of their families, often fathers, more than their own in deciding if an incident was sexual harassment; or whether their sense of discomfort is valid.

Meanwhile in Egypt, film-maker and writer Salma El Tarzi published her email to friends following her rape, chronicling her conviction that this (her rape) incident "happened to us, even if I was your official representative at the crime scene" (El Tarzi 2020). Her account of the violation that she had been exposed to can be read as an attempt to build a "felt community" –with her friends whom she had addressed in her emails, her critical feminist peers in fighting oppressive structures and sexual violence – through her emotions of anger, pain, terror, and guilt





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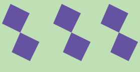

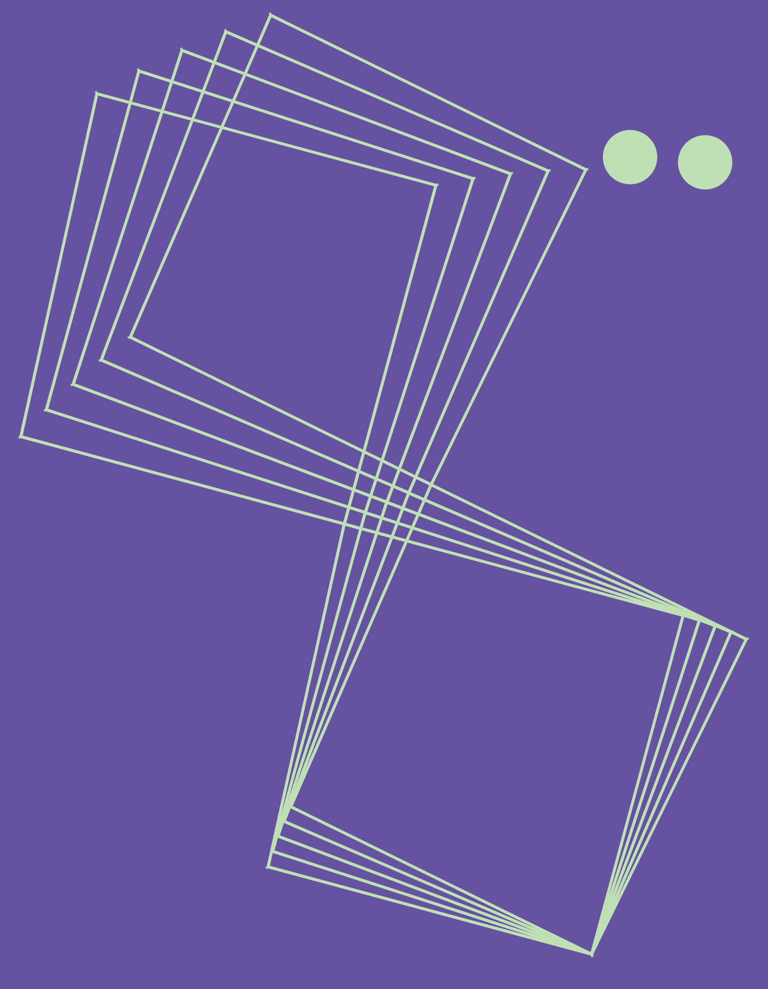

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