#MeToo Movement in Iran:

From Self-blame to Sisterhood

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ABSTRACT

This research delves into the narratives of Iranian victims/survivors within the context of the #MeToo #من-هم movement. By employing thematic analysis, a critical constructivist lens, and drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of feminism (including rape myths and intersectionality) and the concept of symbolic violence, this study uncovers and interprets the recurring themes that emerge from these declarations. It seeks to understand how individuals construct meaning, represent their experiences, and navigate the complex socio-cultural and legal contexts surrounding sexual harassment/assault. The findings of this study suggest that Iranian women's declarations are influenced by dominant gendered discourses, prevalent rape myths, and their intersectional identities. At the same time, their narratives share contextual barriers and a sense of empowerment through sisterhood. Moreover, some recurring themes throughout these declarations highlight the subtle perpetuation of violence by victims/survivors, which is discerned as symbolic violence.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence is a pervasive global issue. The rise of social media and transnational feminism, largely shaped by online discourses in the digital age, has brought attention to the fact that patriarchy, sexism, and sexual violence have never been confined to specific regions, cultures, or religions (Banerjee & Kankaria, 2022). The #MeToo movement has played a significant role in reaffirming this insight.

The phrase "MeToo" was first used in 2006 by Tarana Burke, an African American feminist activist, on the MySpace platform. Burke's intention was to raise awareness about the prevalence of sexual violence and specifically to highlight the experience of a 13-year-old in Alabama who had been sexually abused by her mother's boyfriend in 1997 (Tillet & Tillet, 2019; Ohlheiser, 2017; Leung & Williams, 2019; Trott, 2020; Hannem & Schneider, 2022). It was not, however, until a decade later, in 2017, that #MeToo evolved into a full-fledged movement. This was triggered by Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano, who tweeted in response to allegations of sexual assault against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein (Mendes et al., 2018; Hannem & Schneider, 2022). Following her use of the hashtag, #MeToo ricocheted around the world. Within just one month of Milano's now infamous tweet, at least 2.3 million tweets with the hashtag #MeToo were posted across 85 countries on popular platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram (Kemp, 2020; Hannem & Schneider, 2022). In essence, #MeToo constituted a form of feminist activism, dynamically shaped by the distinct contexts in which it arose.

It took three more years, however, until the summer of 2020, for Iranian women to start sharing declarations of sexual violence on social media using the #MeToo hashtag. The impetus

was a tweet[1] promoting sexual assault, which asserted: "When you date a girl, kiss her if she doesn't push you back, you can fuck her and if she pushes you back say, 'I couldn't resist your beauty,' and you can still fuck her." When a young woman tweeted about the sexual harassment she had experienced at the hands of the tweet's author, it sparked a powerful wave of reaction. Between the 20th and 21st of August, numerous Twitter users shared distressing information about Keyvan Emamverdi, a former archaeology student at the University of Tehran, who allegedly followed a consistent pattern of sexually assaulting dozens of women (Azizi, 2020). Then, on August 22, Iranian journalist Sara Omatali[2] disclosed that she had been assaulted by Aydin Aghdashloo, a renowned artist in Iran, who has received various awards, including the French government's Legion of Honour (@SOmatali, 2020; Hussaini, 2020). These accusations increased the use of hashtags such as #MeToo and #Tajavoz (meaning #Rape) in Iran, marking the birth of an ongoing movement.

We know that the #MeToo movement hinged on the deployment of social media platforms, which have evolved into influential conduits for shaping and disseminating cultural and political messages. In countries like Iran, where the government maintains control over all domestic news agencies, social media becomes even more important. In Iran, even state-run media outlets lack the freedom to engage in discussions about gender-based violence, its associated challenges, and its far-reaching effects. Given this restrictive context, hashtags and active engagement in social media activism have emerged not only as means for raising awareness but also as (however limited) mechanisms to make positive change. Consequently, hashtags such as #MeToo,

[1] Regrettably, the original tweet was deleted by the user after it gained significant attention (receiving more than 1,000 likes). However, there are screenshots of the tweet and a retweeted quote from the woman (@Yegooneh) who shared her experience. It is noteworthy that both individuals were middle-class ordinary people, with the man being a translator and the woman a teacher. This is the link to the woman's original tweet: https://twitter.com/yegooneh/status/1291383592963244032.

[2] https://twitter.com/SOmatali/status/1297060455249313793

#nomeansno, #SexualAssault, #rape, and #metooiran have emerged as critical tools for Iranian activists in their pursuit of equality.

The #MeToo movement has sought to empower and encourage victims/survivors to speak out about their experiences at the same time as it has raised awareness of the prevalence of sexual assault, demonstrated the broad spectrum of sexual harassment, and attended to rape culture. However, to truly understand #MeToo, its dynamics, and its attributes, it is imperative to appreciate the cultural, social, political, and most essential to my argument, legal context in which women mobilize #MeToo.

This research project was inspired by my curiosity about how Iranian women navigate #MeToo, given the unique institutional, cultural, and legal conditions in their country. In the summer of 2020, I found myself captivated by the first wave of #MeToo and the reactions of Twitter users. As someone who has experienced sexual harassment, I had long been bothered by the prevalence of victim-blaming responses and the persistence of beliefs that contribute to rape culture. Simultaneously, I was interested in how Iranian women embraced the limited opportunities presented by movements like #MeToo to combat gender-based violence.

In Iran, research often centers on either workplace and street assault/harassment or intimate partner violence. And while there is a robust body of research on sexual assault/harassment in non-western countries, there is little about #MeToo—most of the existing literature on the movement has been based on western contexts.[3] To address this gap, I seek to reflect on Iranian #MeToo declarations, situating these narratives in the context of a Muslim country governed by Shariah laws. My principal research question is: How do Iranian victims/survivors represent their declarations in the context of the #MeToo #هم-من movement? To this end, employing thematic

[3] In Chapter Two, I explain this gap in more detail.

analysis (qualitative content analysis) as my methodology, I am guided by a critical constructivist epistemology to contextualize the narratives within the socio-cultural context.

Before delving into the thesis outline, it is essential to address several important considerations at the outset. First and foremost, I must acknowledge my own identity and the privileges that come with it. I identify as a Persian cisgender middle-class, able-bodied woman. I am aware of these privileges and how they may have influenced my comprehension, analysis, and interpretation of the subject matter.

Secondly, for the purpose of clarity and consistency in language usage, it is important to briefly discuss some of the terms I have chosen to employ. I use the term 'sexual harassment/assault' because it encompasses a broader range of experiences and aligns closely with the language used by victims/survivors within the #MeToo movement. I have also opted to use the term 'victim/survivor' to account for individuals who identify with either or both terms. This choice is driven by two key considerations: on the one hand, there is an ongoing critical debate surrounding the term 'victim,' which, at times, can inadvertently portray those who have experienced sexual violence as disempowered, passive, or lacking agency. On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that many individuals do consider themselves victims. As such, my language respects self-identification. Furthermore, while I may occasionally use the term 'narratives' to refer to #MeToo experiences, my primary and preferred term is 'declarations.' This choice underscores the need to view these documents for change rather than merely as stories.

- ***Thesis Outline***

I start this research project by providing a concise overview of the Iranian context, including its political, social, cultural, and legal dimensions. I specifically try to shed light on women's rights, challenges, and their enduring resistance throughout the post-revolutionary years. In Chapter Two:

Literature Review: What the Scholarship Says about #MeToo, I orient this thesis in relation to the extensive scholarship on #MeToo (which, as mentioned above, has primarily been conducted in western contexts). This scholarship has made valuable contributions to our understanding of the various aspects of #MeToo, the portrayal of victims/survivors in the media, and the limitations of the movement. While this literature review engages with #MeToo from diverse perspectives, I try to maintain a specific focus on works that approach #MeToo with a feminist sensibility.

Moving forward, I turn to the theoretical framework in the Third Chapter entitled *Theoretical Foundations: Feminism, Symbolic Violence, and Intersectionality*, providing an in-depth discussion of Pierre Bourdieu's insights, and the concepts underpinning feminism. Specifically, I incorporate the concepts of rape myths and intersectional feminism into this framework. In Chapter Four: *Methodology: Framework, Objectives, and Process*, I delve into the methodology, where a thematic analysis approach is considered for this research. Within this chapter, I elucidate the reasoning behind this methodological choice and outline an overview of the key stages involved in its application to the data. Chapter Five, *Identifying the Themes: Sexual Purity or Inherently Violent?*, constitutes the heart of this project, delving into the declarations made by Iranian women in #MeToo. In this chapter, we examine the recurring themes that emerge from these declarations with a focus on their relationship to the existing literature and the broader context of Iran. Drawing upon the theoretical framework established earlier, the sixth chapter, *Discussion of Findings: Interpretation of #MeToo Declarations,* examines these themes through the lenses of symbolic violence and intersectional feminism. The thesis concludes with a reflection on the contributions of the thesis, its limitations, and directions for future research in this field.

CHAPTER ONE

Iranian Sociopolitical Landscape: Women's Rights and Challenges

Iran is a non-Arab, predominantly Muslim country. Shi'ism is the principal religion of Iran. For Iranians, the 1979 revolution (hereafter, the revolution) was undoubtedly one of the most important events of the twentieth century. Led by Ruhollah Khomeini, who became the country's Supreme Leader, the revolution affected many aspects of Iranian citizens' lives in the decades that followed. In this opening chapter, I sketch the legal, social, cultural, and religious ramifications that this exceptional event had for Iranians, particularly women. Of course, by dividing time between before and after the revolution, I am not inferring that women had unlimited rights prior to the revolution, or that they were not discriminated against; rather, I aim to provide a context in order to better understand women's involvement in the ongoing #MeToo movement.

We begin with an overview of the revolution and the prevailing political structure. I then turn the focus to the Iranian women's social status, examining their general legal rights and, crucially, their rights concerning sexual violence and rape. In this section, I also elucidate the barriers and discrimination outlined in the Iranian penal code for reporting such incidents. The final discussion highlights Iranian women's resistance efforts and social movements. This chapter

sets the stage for understanding the complex context in which the #MeToo movement occurs in Iran.

1.1. The Revolution

After the 1979 revolution, in the absence of effective secular leadership—in part because of the elimination or exclusion of other groups from decision-making power such as the communist union, liberal democrats, and liberal nationalists—clerics who had developed religious solidarity over the years against the monarchy, gained authority (Moaddel, 1992; Jahanshahrad, 2012). Adopting a *civil code* based on conservative Islamic law or Sharia, the state began to enforce religious mandates, and women who had played a key role in the revolution against the Shah, saw their rights eroded in the first half of the 1980s (Mahdi, 2004; Aghtaie, 2011; Moghadam, 2004) and were prohibited from participating in many areas of civic and social life (e.g., singing, dancing, the judiciary).

It has been a long road since the revolution, characterized by both setbacks and achievements for women. Importantly, despite all the restrictions and pressures experienced by women, there have also been some accomplishments in specific periods. One of these notable periods was the reformist presidency from 1997 to 2005. During this administration, positive developments were observed in various domains, including foreign policy and women's rights, and as civil society flourished, so did non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and women's magazines devoted to women's rights (Abdmolaei, 2013). In the aftermath of the reform government, there has been an unfortunate regression or stagnation in women's rights policies. I now turn to elaborate on Iran's hierarchical political structure to shed light on both the nature of these restrictive policies and how they are enforced.

1.2. Political Structure

In Iran today, the Supreme Leader, who occupies the highest echelon of authority, is responsible for the supervision of "the general policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (Article 110, 1979). He has the power to appoint and dismiss the chief justice, state radio and television broadcasters, and the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. He also appoints six of the twelve members of the Council of Guardians (Article 110, the Constitution of Iran, 1979). This twelve-member Council of Guardians is comprised of male jurists empowered to vet legislation and oversee elections. This means they have the authority to determine who is allowed to run for political office and veto parliamentary decisions that do not (in their assessment) follow Islamic law (Moghissi & Rahnema, 2001; Alem, 2011). For instance, if a law passed by Parliament is deemed inconsistent with the constitution or sharia, the legislation is referred back to Parliament for revision (Rahnema & Behdad, 1996).

It is notable that the president—the second highest official—must be approved by the Council of Guardians prior to running for office; while Iranian law does not expressly prohibit women from running for president, Article 115 of the Constitution specifies that the president must be elected from among the religious and political elite. The term used in the Persian text for the "political elite" is the Arabic word "Rajol," the literal translation of which is "men" in Persian (Zakersalehi, 2020). Based on this interpretation of the term "Rajol," the Council of Guardians has never approved a woman for a presidential election. Beyond this legal barrier, unwritten barriers persist as well. For example, while women are officially permitted to serve as parliamentarians or heads of ministries, their participation has always been restricted by the Council of Guardians (Jahanshahrad, 2012, p. 235).

1.3. Women in Social Space

Given that women's social position has been related to political structures since the revolution, their social status has undergone fundamental changes in tandem with the political system. The hijab is one of the most controversial issues in post-revolutionary Iran. Prior to the revolution wearing the veil was a matter of personal choice for Iranian Muslim women. However, post-1979, the Islamic Republic mandated wearing a head covering, or hijab, in public irrespective of whether one is Muslim or not. In response to women's resistance and non-compliance with this law, Article 139 was added to the *Islamic Penal Code* in 1995. This provision authorizes punishments that can include imprisonment for up to two months, fines, and even lashes (Centre for Women's Participation, 1999; Sedghi, 2007). In 2005, the government authorized a new branch of the police, the Guidance Patrol, known colloquially as "the morality police," to enforce Islamic dress codes (Abdmolaei, 2013). The violence of the morality police has recently been illustrated in the murder of a twenty-two-year-old Mahsa Jina Amini on September 16th, 2022, for not wearing a 'proper' hijab.[4]

We also see other, less overtly coercive but highly effective, regulations of women's attire and comportment. For example, by repeatedly asserting that women have an inherently seductive nature and that men have an uncontrollable desire for sexual gratification, the state-run media have reinforced the traditional gender expectation that women wear the hijab and carefully control their sexuality (Aghtaie, 2011). As well as using the theory of nature,[5] these discourses also invoke

[4] Most Islamic jurists believe that the entire woman's body, except for the face and hands, has to be covered. It is stated in Article 638 of the *Islamic Penal Code* that the Islamic hijab must be observed; however, neither this article nor any other article of the *Islamic Penal Code* clarifies what an Islamic hijab is and instead authorises the executive, which in this case is the police to ascertain if something is, or is not adequate. A morality police officer's personal opinion determines whether a hijab is appropriate or not.

[5] Based on this theory, women and men are biologically different; thus, they have different rights and obligations.

Sharia to legitimize gender discrimination, which elevates the laws of the Islamic Republic to a sacred status (Kar, 2000 & Haeri, 2009 & Aghtaie, 2017). Those who challenge these gender inequalities are, therefore, at risk of being accused of blasphemy (Aghtaie, 2017).

Notably, while women are strongly discouraged from taking on public roles, and an emphasis is placed on their domestic roles, they are not formally banned from the public sphere (Aghtaie, 2011, p. 121; Moghadam, 2004). Those who are conforming (e.g., affirm the regime's ideologies, adopt the proper hijab, avoid makeup, and adhere to the Supreme Leader's decisions) can work in fields such as health care, education, and public administration.

1.4. Women and Iran's Legal System

Understanding the role of women in Iranian society necessitates a reflection on the country's legal system, where much of the gender discrimination is legitimized. There are several types of provisions in Iranian laws. One of the most important is the *Constitution*, which sets out the general framework for the country's political and social system. Another component of the legal system is the *Civil Code,* encompassing statutes and regulations governing various civic and social relationships, such as property ownership, mortgages, inheritance, citizenship, and marriage. There is also the *Penal Code,* which lays out crimes and punishments. This section presents a brief overview of women's rights (or lack thereof) under the Iranian legal system.

After the revolution, women lost significant rights in regard to their position in the family and upon divorce. According to Lily Pourzand (2010), the *Family Protection Law* (FPL) of 1967, revised in 1975, was abolished by Ayatollah Khomeini. At the same time, the *Iranian Civil Code* reinstated men's unconditional right to divorce and their ability to marry up to four permanent (and an unlimited number of temporary) wives (polygamy). Unlike men, women are not permitted to have multiple husbands at a time.

Divorce can also be difficult for women to obtain. Article 1130, amended in 2002, enumerates some conditions that render the marriage unbearable for the wife, including addiction, imprisonment, or mental illnesses; however, even in these cases, the Court must decide whether the circumstances are truly unbearable. For example, there have been cases where husbands' addictions were proven, but judges ruled that the women must remain in their marriages because the addiction was not deemed severe enough. Moreover, the risk of losing custody of their children is a significant disincentive for women seeking divorce; upon divorce, mothers have priority only until the age of seven, after that custody will devolve to the father (Kar & Pourzand, 2018).

In short, women are compelled to stay in difficult and even abusive marriages. Women's lack of access to marriage dissolution arises from the Islamic Republic's discourse that defends the family as an invaluable institution regardless of the harm that may be done to women. Apart from hindering divorce for women, the *Civil Code* also mandates that husbands provide maintenance (Nafaghe) to their wives (Mir-Hosseini, 2000; Tizro, 2012); however, in return, women must obey their husbands and fulfill their sexual needs. In other words, if a woman refuses to have sex with her husband, he is not obliged to provide financial support. Furthermore, according to Sharia law, "Tamkin" (complete sexual submission) grants men the right to coerce their wives into participating in sexual activity (Shahidian, 2002, pp. 179-180; Article 1108). Many scholars argue that it reduces the woman to an "instrumental creature" of exploitation while simultaneously ensuring that marital rape is unrecognized in law (Shukri & Labriz, 1992; Aghtaie, 2011).

The challenges Iranian women confront getting a divorce are particularly notable, given the existence of forced marriages and restrictions on women's freedom to choose their partners. Following the revolution, the minimum legal age for marriage decreased to fifteen for boys and nine for girls (Kar & Pourzand, 2018; Aghtaie, 2011). This spurred much critique and in 2002,

Article 1041 of the *Civil Law* was changed to read: "Marriage for girls before attaining age 13 and for boys before attaining age 15 is only allowed by the guardian's permission, with the interests of the subject in mind and by the ruling of a competent court" (Clark et al., 2019; Alavi, 2019, p. 5). In real terms, this still means that minors below this age remain at risk of forced marriages if their legal guardians consent. At the same time, for a daughter's first marriage, the consent of either her father or paternal grandfather is mandatory, meaning even a mature woman who has never been married must obtain consent from her male relatives to wed (Article 1043, *Iranian Civil Code*).

In addition to depriving women of the freedom to choose their spouse, several other notable laws exist that have substantial economic implications for women and effectively limit their options. For instance, the *Iranian Civil Code* stipulates that a female child's inheritance is half that of a male child. Article 907 states: "If the deceased has no parent but one or more children, the estate is divided as follows: if there is only one child, either male or female, the entire estate goes to him or her. If there is more than one child and all male or all female, the estate is divided evenly among them. If there is more than one child with different genders, the male children inherit twice as much as the female children" (*Iranian Civil Code).* The same logic applies when a spouse dies—under Islamic inheritance law, a man is granted his deceased wife's entire estate, while a widow receives only one-eighth of her husband's estate.

1.5. The Iranian Penal Code

In addition to the *Civil Code,* it is important to consider the *Iranian Penal Code*. This *penal code* has four main sections with a total of 729 articles (*Iranian Penal Code*, 1991). Within these codes, there are four types of punishments for criminal cases, which are divided into Hudud[6], Ghesas,

[6] In Islam, Hudud refers to punishment for particular crimes that the grounds for, type, amount, and conditions of execution are explicitly defined in the Quran or Hadith (a collection of traditions containing the sayings and customs

Diyat, and Ta'zirat[7], and in each, we see gender bias. I will not delve into the details of every one; however, one blatant example provides a telling example of the lack of value afforded women. Diyat, which is translated as Mulct, is a punishment that takes the form of compensation or blood money. Based on the *Iranian Civil Code*, murderers, as opposed to a woman, must pay the victim's survivors twice as much if the victim is a man (Article 487). We now turn to discuss two crucial components related to #MeToo narratives—how the *Iranian Penal Code* addresses consensual and forced sexual relations.

- ***Zena / Zena-e ba onf va ekrah***

In the *Iranian Penal Code*, the term *Zena* is defined as illegitimate intercourse between a man and a woman who are not married (Article 221, *Iranian Penal Code*). This term therefore refers to a married person who has a sexual relationship with someone other than their spouse (adultery) as well as a sexual relationship between a boyfriend and girlfriend (sex outside of marriage[8]). Legally, zena only occurs when there is penetration of either the anus or vagina (Tavajjohi & Tavakolpour, 2011). Importantly, adultery is considered a serious crime in Iran, and in certain circumstances, even the death penalty can be applied if the case involves married individuals. In this regard, it is necessary to consider that while women get punished for adultery, the law affords men ways of escaping sanctions. Article 226 allows for a change in the death penalty sentence to flogging for men under specific conditions, including when their wives are traveling, imprisoned, menstruating,

of Muhammad in his daily life) (Article 15, Iranian Penal Code). Under Islamic law, Hudud crimes must be proved, the circumstances must be met, and punishment must follow.

[7] Ta'zir is a punishment that does not include retribution, mulcts, or bail, and since there is no equivalent term in English for Ta'zir, it requires a little more explanation. Islamic Jurisprudence does not determine this punishment as opposed to Hudud. Its extent and manner are left to the judge's discretion; examples of punishment include imprisonment, lashings, and fines. The law, however, specifies mitigating circumstances in which the court can take into account and modify or reduce the condemnation based on these circumstances (Article 16 & 22, 1990), for instance, a person's mental and psychological state at the time of the crime (Article 18, Iranian Penal Code).

[8] Consensual sex between two single individuals who are not married is punishable by flogging (Article 221-288, Iranian Penal Code).

or suffering from a disease like HIV/AIDS. This is important because using this law, a man could claim that his wife was away on a trip, meaning he could not have sex with her, and escape the harsh punishment of adultery.[9]

Revealingly, zena ba enf va ekrah, which refers to rape in the *Iranian Penal Code*, falls under the zena section of the law. This placement implies that rape is criminalized at the same level as consensual sexual relations, which some scholars regard as a "minimization" of rape (Aghtaie, 2011, p. 125). To understand how the *Iranian Penal Code* addresses forced sexual intercourse, first, it is necessary to appreciate that there is no actual term for 'rape' in Iran's legal texts; instead, it is always referred to as *zena-e ba onf va ekrah*, which means forced sexual intercourse with a woman to whom the perpetrator is not married (Aghtaie, 2011, p. 127). Aghtaie (2017) explains that the word "onf" signifies force or violence, which implies resistance on the victim's part. The term "ekrah," however, could be used to describe a situation in which the victim did not consent but failed to display signs of resistance (for example, as a result of fear or threats). Notably, since penile penetration must occur either in the vagina or anus, forced oral sex is not prosecutable under "zena-e ba onf va ekrah." In principle, the punishment for "zena-e ba onf va ekrah" is the death penalty (Clause 224, *Iranian Penal Code*). There is also compensation to be paid by the perpetrator called Arsholbekareh[10] if "zena-e ba onf va ekrah" (rape) occurs to a virgin girl.

One last point that needs to be addressed in this section is that fornication with a woman who is unconscious, asleep, or intoxicated is considered zena-e ba onf va ekrah (rape), and the

[9] Temporary marriage could also be an excuse men use to avoid adultery allegations. As we discussed previously, men are not punished for temporary marriages.

[10] Compensation for the loss of virginity outside marriage in rape cases, which has to be paid by the convicted aggressor. Article 441 of the Islamic Penal Code stipulates that rupturing the hymen will result in payment of mulct, even in an unintentional manner, such as a car accident.

death penalty remains applicable (Note 2, Article 224, *Iranian Penal Code*); however, the application of this punishment remains controversial due to the differing opinions among Taqlid authorities[11]. Some Taqlid authorities, whose views are influential in Iranian law, oppose the death penalty in cases where the victim is unconscious, sleeping, or intoxicated, making the punishment subject to the judge's personal interpretation (Tavajjohi & Tavakolpour, 2011). This issue will be further developed in the following section.

1.6. Barriers to Reporting Sexual Violence

To this point, we have seen that despite the fact that some sexual assaults are, in principle, serious offenses, there are numerous shortcomings—in the law—in practice. It becomes even more evident when we consider the barriers to reporting and conviction. This section describes some of the barriers that further complicate the pursuit of legal action in cases of rape.

The first barrier is related to situations where the victims/survivors were intoxicated or unconscious as a result of the consumption of a substance. In Iran, consuming intoxicating liquors is punishable (under Article 165) by up to 80 lashes, and if the consumption of alcohol occurs in public, there is an additional two to six months of imprisonment. Moreover, if a person commits the crime of drinking alcohol for the fourth time, the punishment will be death (Article 179, *Iranian Penal Code*). With the criminalization of consuming alcoholic beverages, it is not surprising that some rape victims are less likely to seek legal help if they had consumed alcohol at the time of the assault.

At the same time, as noted above, verdicts in rape cases when the victim is unconscious vary greatly and often depend on the personal views of the individual judges, their perceptions of

[11] Taqlid authorities or mujtahid are clerics with the highest rank in Islamic jurisprudence and laws. For religious practice, Muslims rely on their interpretations.

Islamic ideology, and their interpretations of Islamic verses (Aghtaie, 2011). The result is very different rulings for similar cases. Some perpetrators have not been prosecuted because judges believed that the victim did not show signs of resistance before the substance was administered by the aggressor (see Aghtaie, 2011). In contrast, there are cases like that of a serial rapist (Keyvan Emamverdi), who was convicted and sentenced to death after being accused of drugging and raping dozens of women (Iranwire, 2022).

The second barrier to prosecution is the number of eyewitnesses required in sexual assault cases. Articles 160-213 of the *Islamic Panel Code* outline three ways to prove rape: confession, testimony, and the knowledge of the judge. The testimony section stipulates that four male witnesses are required to testify that a rape has occurred (Article 199). Importantly, in order to testify about rape, the witness must have seen the commission of the act (Article 200). Professor Mehrangiz Kar (2000), a human rights lawyer, in response to this clause, argues that rape generally occurs behind closed doors, meaning that an over-reliance on providing witnesses prevents women from coming forward to file complaints.

Moreover, if four male witnesses are unavailable, the court accepts the testimony of two "righteous" men and four "righteous" women, but this reduces the punishment from death to flogging (Article 199). In this regard, we need to clarify two pertinent points. First, the legal texts do not clearly define who qualifies as a "righteous" man or woman, leaving it to the judges' personal interpretation (Aghtaie, 2017). Second, it goes without saying that taking a man's testimony as equivalent to that of two women constitutes severe discrimination against women and is grossly unfair. This clause shows that for instance, if a woman claims she was raped by a man, but the man claims the sex was consensual, the court gives more credence to the man's statement. The difference in the number of male and female witnesses is rooted in a gendered ideology that

considers women innately emotional, and assumes that their emotions impede their rational thinking—thus, their testimony is half as reliable as those of men.

It is important to highlight that in rape cases where neither confession nor testimony is available, the judge can base their decision on medical evidence. However, the burden of proof still rests with the victims/survivors who may not have retained physical evidence of rape, and the results of medical examinations alone do not constitute valid evidence. In fact, a medical expert's opinion is of scant value unless the victim was a virgin at the time of the rape (Kar, 2000). Finally, the criminalization of extramarital relationships adds another layer of complexity to reporting sexual assault. Many women who are raped by their boyfriends or acquaintances are unable to file a complaint in court for fear of being accused or prosecuted for having an illicit relationship.

In addition to legal barriers, a multitude of cultural barriers further complicate the reporting of sexual violence in Iran. Many factors have elevated the concept of virginity and honor into a moral symbol. Some of them were mentioned earlier, such as gendered laws,[12] and they are too numerous to detail in this thesis. But the point that cannot be overlooked is that the combination of these factors makes virginity and honor a moral value that women are supposed to safeguard until marriage. The loss of virginity outside of marriage has not only been criminalized (as we saw above) but is also considered a colossal disgrace for both the woman and her family.[13] By considering virginity as integral to the honor of the family, preserving it (or the appearance of it) may become assessed to be more important than pursuing and retaliating against an aggressor. Indeed, survivors may remain silent for fear of the stigma that losing their virginity entails for their families.

[12] Such as gender segregation, the prohibition of sexual relations outside of marriage, and the fact that a virgin girl must obtain the consent of her father or grandfather before marrying.

[13] It is notable even in cases where perpetrators are sentenced to death, they are punished not for violating a woman's sexual rights but because they injured the property and honor of another man (Aghtaie, 2011).

Last but not least, is a fifth barrier—the death sentence for the aggressors. For many years, women's rights activists have consistently condemned the harsh punishments for rape in Iranian laws. They generally received answers stating that these harsh punishments are intended to deter and prevent the spread of such offenses in society. However, women's activists claim that not only has the death penalty failed to deter these sexual crimes and protect women, but it has also made it less likely a guilty verdict will be rendered. In other words, given that the punishment for perpetrators is death, judges are very cautious regarding the admissibility of evidence presented by victims/survivors, and unless there is incontrovertible evidence, the rape will not be considered to have been proven. Such a difficult litigation procedure also likely discourages rape victims/survivors from filing complaints and pursuing the judicial process.

Essentially, the factors discussed above indicate that the ambiguity and contradictory nature of the laws coupled with their inconsistent implementation, and cultural norms surrounding virginity and honor, make it difficult for victims/survivors to prosecute the perpetrators while providing opportunities for offenders to evade sanction.

1.7. Women's Resistance and Lack of Unity

Despite the numerous constraints detailed in this chapter, Iranian women have a rich history of striving for equal rights and status. This resistance has deep roots, dating back to well before the 1979 Revolution. Iranian women had achieved significant milestones, including the right to vote in 1963, participating in public offices, securing legal protections in family matters, and asserting their rights in divorce and custody (Basmechi, forthcoming).

In this section, I begin by explaining how the government has politicized women's rights and positions in society. Next, I identify and categorize Iranian women who advocate for gender equality into two general groups. The first group, "religious revisionist women" are also sometimes

referred to as religious intellectual women; the second group primarily consists of secular feminist human rights advocates, who will be referred to as "secular feminist activists."

Taking a closer look at these two groups sheds light on their different perspectives, achievements, and challenges. It also allows us to consider how ideological conflict and differing priorities have created conflicts among women and resulted in the emergence of these distinct groups. At the same time, this section highlights that despite legal and social restrictions, women continue to mobilize for their rights, indicating the presence of a robust feminist movement in Iran.

Sadeghi argues that Pahlavi's[14] modernization (Westernization) policies through forced unveiling led to the marginalization of religious women, stigmatizing them as traditional, backwards, and uncivilized (2010, p. 213). In fact, the 1979 revolution was a response to this marginalization by the people who had been most impacted. Women, especially the working class and the religious, deemed the revolution an opportunity to emancipate themselves from the Western values imposed by the Pahlavi regime.

Following the 1979 revolution, fundamentalist clerics combined this anti-imperialism (anti-western) discourse that developed during the Pahlavi era with an anti-feminist narrative. They depicted feminism as an anti-family and anti-religious movement founded on Western values that sought to undermine the foundation of the Iranian family as well as its culture and faith. Using this strategy, the Islamic Republic has justified its gender policies according to religion and the claim to defend family values, all while suppressing intellectuals who advocate gender equality with accusations of promoting anti-religious and Westernized values. Although discriminatory and misogynistic policies imposed by the Islamic Republic negatively affected many women who

[14] Pahlavi was the last Iranian royal dynasty before the 1979 revolution. Reza Pahlavi was the ruler and founder of the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran. He banned Muslim women from wearing the veil in order to modernize the country (Bakhshizadeh, 2018).

supported the 1979 Islamic revolution, these activists hesitated to identify as feminists because of the inflammatory portrayal of feminism by fundamentalist clerics (Paidar, 2002). Instead, these religious activists refer to themselves as "religious revisionist women" rather than Islamic feminists (Sadeghi, 2010, p. 216).

Religious revisionist women are mostly reformist women who wished to reconcile Islam and women's rights. They cite well-known Quranic verses to argue that women's and men's positions in God's sight are unrelated to their physical differences. For instance, in a prominent magazine during the reformist era (1997 to 2005), *Zanan*, a religious revisionist author, referenced a Quranic verse stating: "I waste not the labor of any that labors among you, be you male or female—the one of you is as the other" (Najmabadi, 1998, p. 73). This verse emphasizes that work and effort are the basis of God's evaluation, not gender. By quoting verses that highlight women's and men's equality, and using female-friendly sources of Islam, religious revisionists contended that religion inherently mandates equal rights for all (Najmabadi, 1998). These women believe that by referring to the same religious source used by fundamentalists, clerics could not easily justify gender discrimination.

Some of the religious revisionist women were members of political parties and tried to gain a parliament position to address women's issues and promote gender equality. They considered their problems to be primarily political rather than religious in nature. It is important to appreciate several women among them, such as Azam Taleghani, who served as a parliamentarian and actively worked to amend gender-discriminatory laws. During her tenure, she made demands on the government for gender equality and greater opportunities for women (Moghadam, 2004). In practice, the revisionist women's ability to realize change has been hampered by the entrenchment of misogynist reading of religious principles and fundamentalist clerics. Of course, the reformist

women have also made a few mistakes, including failing to build an alliance for all Iranian women and with secular feminist activists, which I will elaborate on further below.

There are also secular feminist activists in Iran; however, many of them have either been executed, tortured in prison or fled the country. These include Nobel Peace Prize winner, Shirin Ebadi, and Mehrangiz Kar, a human rights lawyer and scholar (Paidar, 1995; Hoodfar, 1999; Sadeghi, 2010). These secular feminist activists employ different strategies and perspectives in their pursuit of gender equality. On the one side of the spectrum are left-wing feminists who believe in mobilizing women in public spaces, engaging in street protests, and making their activism highly visible (Hoodfar, 2009). Despite the risks associated with their activities, these progressive left feminists focus on reaching out to ordinary women, including those in rural and poor areas. On the other side of the spectrum, there are feminist activists with a liberal political orientation who utilize diplomatic strategies, such as leveraging pressure from foreign human rights organizations to bring about policy changes. Though, in principle, both groups share a common goal of liberating women, they approach this goal in distinct ways (Hoodfar, 2009).

While Iranian women activists have never been entirely united because of the secular–versus–religious schism, at times, they have come together and opened a space for shared initiatives. It was during the reform period (1997 to 2005) that religious revisionist activists and secular feminists began to formulate new ways of working together. As an example, the 2006 "One Million Signature Campaign," [15] was supported by activists from various political and religious backgrounds. However, the ability to effect change was short-lived. Immediately after the end of the reform era, in 2005, state resistance, prevention, and blocking of such campaigns amplified,

[15] This campaign, which was officially launched on 25 August 2006, followed the successful Moroccan campaign that used face-to-face interactions as a means of collecting signatures. Activists approached people in public places to gain attention and signatures in support of legal reform, particularly regarding family law (Hoodfar & Sadeghi, 2009).

the alliances dissipated, and women's ability to organize and fight for change was undermined. Indeed, fundamentalists did not even tolerate magazines run by religious revisionist women such as *Zanan* (it was shut down in 2008 under government orders) (Bakhshizadeh, 2018).

It is important to note that both groups, religious revisionist women and secular (leftists and liberal) feminists, are composed of urban women from the middle and upper-class socioeconomic stratas. Consequently, their interests may not always align with the needs and concerns of rural and/or working-class women. For example, while rural women are preoccupied with health, sanitation, and welfare, middle-class and elite feminists are more concerned with educational opportunities, the right to participate in social activities, human rights, divorce, child custody, and inheritance (Mahdi, 2004). Initiatives such as the One Million Signature Campaign and the Anti-Stoning Campaign failed to represent the interests of poor rural women, and women from minority ethnic backgrounds, speaks to tensions between the specific expectations of rural women and those of urban activist women (Sadeghi, 2010).

In rural areas, women from less privileged and marginalized communities, particularly those from ethnic and religious minority groups may be unaware of their limited rights due to illiteracy rates, poverty, or even because the law is not easily accessible in ethnic languages (Kar & Pourzand, 2018, p. 75). Moreover, for women from marginalized communities, local and legal patterns of patriarchy intersect with the Islamic Republic's discriminatory policies towards ethnic and religious minorities. In real terms, this means they encounter not only elevated levels of repression but a complex web of violence and discrimination (Mahdi, 2004; Kar & Pourzand, 2018). For example, Amnesty International (2020) reports that employment opportunities, housing, health, education, and freedom of expression are limited for Arab, Azeri, Balochi, and Kurdish communities in Iran. The situation intersects with forced/early marriages and domestic

violence for women in these communities. It is therefore important to consider the myriad of different ways the revolution impacted Iranian women depending on factors like class, ethnicity, and geographical location.

Given the numerous hardships that poor rural women navigate, changing government policies - even policies that negatively impact them - may not necessarily be their top priority. At the same time, the failure of activists (both religious and secular) to build alliances across ethnicities and the rural/urban divide and to prioritize rural women's interests, coupled with governmental obstructions, makes mobilization difficult (but not impossible). In the coming section, we will see that Iranian women have, barriers notwithstanding, resisted and small gains have been made. For example, although the custody laws have not changed, women activists forced Parliament to pass a bill giving the right of custody to the mother in some cases (CSHR, 2019).

- ***Women's Resistance***

Acknowledging the continuing vigor of the barriers institutionalized in the social, cultural, and interactional realms of the Islamic Republic, many ordinary women have shaken up the status quo and have worked diligently to enter various social, civic, and educational fields (Mahdi, 2004; Kar & Pourzand, 2018). For example, in 1999, 57% of university entrants were women, which might help to explain why the literacy rate for women increased from 52% in 1987 to 72% in 1997 (Rouleau, 1999; Aghtaie, 2011).

In recent years, heightened awareness and increased access to education and modern technology have increased the cost of social control, putting tremendous pressure on the Islamic Republic of Iran to ease restrictions (Mahdi, 2004). Women's mobilization through social media could be seen as accelerating at the same time as many Iranian women, particularly those from the

younger generations, have lost confidence in religious revisionism. Online platforms have provided women with more opportunities to communicate and build a space for solidarity to resist Islamic Republic policies. As a result, several campaigns, including one led by exiled journalist Masih Alinjad, have been launched. The #whitewednesdays campaign involved Iranian women wearing white headscarves on Wednesdays and posting their videos on social media, using the hashtag #whitewednesdays as a protest against the mandatory hijab. Of course, the cost can be extremely high—some women, such as Saba Kurd Afshari, were arrested and released after four years on February 8, 2023.

In the last civil protest against the hijab, before Mahsa Jina Amini's death, a woman named Vida Movahed climbed a telecommunication box in one of Tehran's major streets while holding a white scarf tied to a stick. She stood there silently until she was arrested. Her photo went viral on social media, and she earned the nickname “Revolution Street Girl.” In the following weeks and throughout the winter of 2017-2018, despite often facing brutal police violence, an increasing number of women stood silently on telephone boxes, waving their headscarves. This independent movement marked one of the most significant resistance moments in Iranian women's rights history (Akbari, 2022).

Concluding Comments

This chapter has shed light on the myriad and interrelated challenges Iranian women confrount, with a focus on those related to sexual violence and gender discrimination. We have seen that women's "deficiency" and "lack of rational judgment" are presented as facts within the theocratic political framework and that this justifies the erosion of women's position in society. We have also seen that the legal system which follows the institutionalized sexist ideology of the Islamic Republic entrenches discrimination. As such, it is unsurprising to see those unequal marriage laws

give men a sense of entitlement over women's bodies, which can lead to more violence toward women. Despite these formidable barriers, the chapter has also endeavored to draw attention to Iranian women's resistance and determination to bring about change. Women in Iran have, and continue to, risk much to challenge the status quo and push for even small incremental improvements. In the process, I have endeavoured to set the stage to understand the specificity of #MeToo in Iran.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review: What the Scholarship Says About #MeToo

In this chapter, I first examine the media coverage of #MeToo. I then delve into scholarly research on the nature of #MeToo as a digital feminist movement and its significance in the realm of hashtag feminism. In this section, I also touch upon studies that explore the benefits, barriers, and limitations of #MeToo, shedding light on its impacts and challenges. We then shift focus and consider aspects that have been overlooked in the existing #MeToo literature—the marginalized narratives, the recognition of Tarana Burke's and Black women's efforts, the victim blaming and victimization in mainstream media, the intersectional nature of barriers faced by victims/survivors, and a broader spectrum of online attacks experienced by victims/survivors. The chapter also highlights the limited studies conducted on #MeToo in non-western countries, with a focus on three noteworthy research contributions in this realm. Lastly, I draw attention to the limited research on the content of #MeToo narratives. This chapter concludes by discussing the knowledge gaps and highlighting the contribution that my project aims to make in this regard.

2.1. MEDIA AND #METOO

The significant role the media plays in shaping public discourses and individuals' understanding of the world is undeniable. As an agent of socialization the media teaches us what dominant societal values are while legitimating and perpetuating hegemonic norms and stereotypical language through its representations (Bourdieu, 1998; Fairclough, 1989; Glennie, 2018; Kelly, 2010).

In recent years, there has been a growing surge in the use of social media, providing accessible platforms and sources for users. This shift has not only offered new spaces for activists to raise awareness and reach broader audiences, irrespective of geographical location, but has also transformed the audience from mere consumers into active participants and creators. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that mainstream media still holds sway over the direction of social media platforms and public discourses (Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018; De Benedictis et al., 2019).

Given that #MeToo is primarily a media-driven phenomenon in the West and considering the pivotal role of media in shaping public discourse, much of the #MeToo scholarship has delved into the representation of #MeToo in Western mainstream media outlets (e.g., Guha, 2021; Leung & Williams, 2019; De Benedictis et al., 2019; Colpitts, 2019; Eilermann, 2018; Hannem & Schneider, 2022; Nuraddin, 2018). Below, I will review the recurring themes found in studies that examined the ways #MeToo was represented in mainstream media.

2.1.1. Mainstream Media Representation of #MeToo

The studies analyzing mainstream media coverage of the #MeToo movement reveal three salient themes. Firstly, mainstream media tends to focus on white women, with a particular focus on white women who are celebrities. Secondly, mainstream media often focus on cis-men celebrity

perpetrators in their coverage of #MeToo, Lastly, the representation of women of color in mainstream media is often deployed to discredit the #MeToo movement.

- ***Mainstream media tends to focus on white women, with a particular focus on white women who are celebrities***

Research has shown that media attention to #MeToo narratives is not distributed equally among victims/survivors (De Benedictis et al., 2019; Guha, 2021; Hannem & Schneider, 2022; Leung & Williams, 2019). Indeed, there is a range of factors, such as power and social status, class, geographical location, and race, that influences the media's portrayal of experiences within the #MeToo movement (De Benedictis et al., 2019; Guha, 2021; Hannem & Schneider, 2022; Leung & Williams, 2019). The following studies provide insights into some of these factors by examining media coverage of specific #MeToo cases.

Hannem and Schneider (2022) illuminate the importance of victims'/survivors' social status in capturing media attention and establishing them as credible voices. The authors provide an example to support their argument, noting that the lack of celebrity status in the assertions against Weinstein led to minimal coverage of Ambra Battilana's case. In contrast, when well-known Hollywood actress Ashly Judd brought forward her allegations, the case received extensive media attention and was taken more seriously.

Moreover, a study examining the UK press reveals a selectively racialized approach in the coverage of #MeToo within the *Daily Mail*, *Guardian*, and *Independent*. The study indicates that these media outlets portray "white celebrity women" as desirable and ideal victims/survivors, while often sidelining non-white women's narratives (De Benedictis et al., 2019, p. 731).

Leung and Williams (2019) provide further evidence of racialized patterns by examining media coverage of sexual violence cases involving Bill Cosby[16], R. Kelly[17], and Harvey Weinstein.[18] They found that despite a quarter of the victims/survivors of Cosby being black or women of colour, media coverage predominantly portrayed them as white women (pp. 356–357). Similarly, they have shown that the declarations against Kelly came out three months earlier than the Weinstein scandal but did not receive the same level of media attention because of the different races of the victims/survivors. In short, these scholars draw attention to the double standard of media coverage based on race—focusing on "high-profile white women" as survivors and ignoring "non-famous African American women" (Leung & Williams, 2019, p. 355).

- ***Mainstream media often focus on cis-men celebrity perpetrators in their coverage of #MeToo***

The second theme identified in the literature is the media's tendency to deny the actions (or at least offering complementary presentations) of (often high-profile) male perpetrators. Tarana Burke has drawn attention to this issue, noting the way media coverage of #MeToo has predominantly focused on cis-men celebrity abusers rather than centring on the experiences of victims/survivors (Rowley, 2018). Nuraddin's study (2018) supports Burke's argument by examining the #MeToo coverage of three major international media outlets (CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera). The findings reveal that these media outlets depict high-profile accusers in a personalized manner by naming them and humanizing their experiences (Nuraddin, 2018). Furthermore, a strong concern is

[16] Bill Cosby is an American stand-up comedian, actor, and producer who has faced numerous allegations of sexual assault, and became a prominent example within the #MeToo movement.

[17] R. Kelly, a renowned Black musician, has faced numerous accusations of engaging in inappropriate sexual relationships with underage girls over the course of his 30-year career.

[18] Harvey Weinstein is a former American film producer and executive accused of sexual misconduct and assault by multiple women in 2017. The allegations against Weinstein sparked a widespread reaction and are often cited as a landmark in the #MeToo movement.

observed for accused men in minor media reports. This being said, in some instances, these three outlets' reports tend to portray #MeToo as a "witch-hunt" targeting powerful men, rather than acknowledging its true intention of initiating a dialogue about power abuse and sexual assault (Nuraddin, 2018, p. 55). Additionally, Hannem and Schneider (2022) pointed out that the mainstream media provide opportunities for celebrity (male) perpetrators to convince the public that victims/survivors may be selling their testimonies to the media to gain "financial benefits" (p. 88).

- ***Mainstream media have attempted to discredit the #MeToo movement by exploiting the absence of narratives from women of color***

The third theme identified is drawn from Eilermann's (2018) analysis of four prominent German newspapers. This study highlights that only one publication among those opposing the #MeToo movement acknowledged the invisibility of women of color victims/survivors; however, it did so with an underlying intention to discredit the experiences shared by other victims/survivors and criticize feminism, rather than genuinely address the issue. Specifically, the Welt (a German national daily newspaper), after describing the movement as "hysteria," claimed that #MeToo did not care about regions where women face horrific violence like stoning or acid attacks: "It wasn't about those who needed help. It was about the women of the West" (Eilermann, 2018, pp. 34-36). This theme is notable because it shows even in rare instances when mainstream media covers the absence of women of color, there exists a subtle intention to undermine the entire #MeToo movement (Colpitts, 2019; Eilermann, 2018).

Having addressed the recurring criticisms regarding #MeToo representation in mainstream media, we now turn to examine the literature on #MeToo as a digital feminist movement, illustrating its outcomes, barriers, and limitation.

2.2. THE NATURE OF #METOO AS A DIGITAL FEMINIST MOVEMENT

2.2.1. Hashtag Activism

Hashtag activism refers to a form of social movement that primarily operates through social media platforms, where a specific hashtag is used to organize and connect posts related to a particular movement or topic of concern (O'Halloran, 2022). This form of activism is largely centered around sharing and retweeting and may not necessarily be accompanied by tangible real-world actions (Hebenstreit, 2019). Hashtags were initially introduced on Twitter in 2007, but the potential effectiveness and usefulness of hashtag activism can be traced back to 2009; when the hashtag #IranElection gained popularity on Twitter as a means of organizing protests against the Iranian presidential election (Hannem & Schneider, 2022, p.135; Jackson et al., 2020). Since then, activists have increasingly utilized Twitter and other social media platforms for contemporary activism. They take advantage of these platforms' autonomy from traditional media outlets and create hashtags to facilitate discussions, connections, and mobilization (Jackson et al., 2020).

It is important to note that hashtag activism serves different purposes and may not necessarily aim to subvert political systems or mobilize people for street protests. Many hashtags, such as #BlackLivesMatter, #SlutWalk, and #YesAllWomen, serve as expressions of solidarity and unity, seeking to raise awareness, open up a space for discussion around broader social issues, and provide a mechanism to draw attention to marginalized experiences.

2.2.2. Hashtag Feminism

Hashtag feminism is a notable and influential form of hashtag activism. The advent of social media and the utilization of hashtags have enabled transnational communication, and feminists have

effectively developed a virtual community that transcends geographical boundaries. They predominantly aim to raise users' collective awareness and address issues related to gender equality, misogyny, and rape culture (Onwuachi-Willig, 2018; Huh, 2019; Mendes et al., 2018).

- ***Positive Impacts of the #MeToo Movement Identified in the #MeToo Scholarship***

The #MeToo movement is arguably one of the most significant media moments and widely publicized examples of hashtag feminism (Huh, 2019; Phipps, 2019; O'Halloran, 2022). Indeed, a growing body of literature is dedicated to exploring the impact of #MeToo as a digital feminist movement (e.g., Glos, 2019; Mendes et al., 2018; Mendes & Ringrose, 2019; Mendes & Ringrose, 2019; Trott, 2021; Phipps, 2019; Huh, 2019; Kunst et al., 2018). Numerous positive outcomes of #MeToo, including forming networks, fostering solidarity and providing support, challenging rape myths, and mobilizing collective action are examined below.

Firstly, #MeToo enables users to overcome geographical distance and establish networks with like-minded individuals who share similar views on issues related to sexual violence (Chetty, 2021). This networking capability is facilitated by hashtags and features on platforms such as Likes and Retweets. The #MeToo movement empowers victims/survivors to build their own communities and promote cohesive networks, which can show collective power for sexual violence issues (Trott, 2020).

Secondly, #MeToo fosters a sense of supportive community through interpersonal communication, leading to connections, support, and solidarity among activists as well as victims/survivors (Mendes et al., 2018). Studies have shown that this sense of solidarity has a profound impact on challenging the distinction between "more serious" and "less serious" experiences, thereby reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation among victims/survivors (Phipps, 2019, p. 6; Huh, 2019). Glos (2019) supports the same point by emphasizing that

solidarity alleviates the shame, powerlessness, and fear of backlash. Glos's findings (2019) suggest that #MeToo was perceived as a form of protection against feeling "alone" by victims/survivors (p. 36).

Thirdly, the #MeToo movement offers online users a means to exchange information, educate each other, and challenge rape myths (Mendes & Ringrose, 2019; O'Halloran, 2022; Almanssori & Stanley, 2021). The empirical data presented by Mendes and Ringrose (2019) demonstrates that #MeToo has initiated a widespread conversation about the importance of consent and has contributed to a shift in the general perception that victims/survivors are telling the truth. There are also two studies that focused on vloggers who shared their experiences of sexual harassment/assault using the #MeToo hashtag (Almanssori & Stanley, 2021; O'Halloran, 2022). In the first study, Almanssori and Stanley (2021) illustrate how #MeToo provides victims/survivors with a space to validate their experiences without minimizing or oversimplifying the harassment/assault they have endured. In the later study by O'Halloran (2022), vloggers acknowledged the internalized rape myths as a silencing factor before #MeToo occurred. All twelve women in the study expressed their resistance to feelings of self-blame and guilt, finding that other people's narratives using #MeToo helped clarify and challenge the existing rape myths (O'Halloran, 2022).

Lastly, #MeToo serves as a mechanism for victims/survivors to share their declarations, which in turn stimulates more people to advocate and push for change (Mendes & Ringrose, 2019). Indeed, some findings show that #MeToo led to a broader range of women engaging in feminist actions (Mendes et al., 2018). For instance, in a study conducted by Mendes et al. (2018), one of the interviewees said that she started to identify as a feminist only after sharing her own declaration.

Despite the positive impact and opportunities provided by #MeToo, it is important to attend to the structural limitations or barriers that inhibit the ability of some victims/survivors to participate. In the following section, I turn to what the scholarly literature highlights regarding barriers and their effects on victims'/survivors' engagement in #MeToo.

- ***Barriers of the #MeToo Movement According to the Literature***

Several studies have investigated the challenges and barriers faced by victims/survivors when participating in the #MeToo movement (Mendes et al., 2018; Pulido et al., 2021; O'Halloran, 2022; Andreasen, 2020; Almanssori & Stanley, 2019; Kemp, 2020; Guha, 2021). In this section, I will categorize the findings of studies into three main recurring barriers: online attacks, language barriers, and limited internet accessibility.

The first barrier identified by scholarly research is the potential risk of cyber-attacks and trolling on online platforms, which adds to the complexity of using social media as a means of resistance (Almanssori & Stanley, 2019; Mendes et al., 2018). Scholars have observed that sharing experiences by using #MeToo can render victims/survivors vulnerable to online attacks (O'Halloran, 2022; Mendes et al., 2018; Huh, 2019; Clark-Parsons, 2019). Victims/survivors engaging with #MeToo often experience anxiety and fear of being targeted by online abuse or trolling (Mendes et al., 2018, p. 242), and the severity of these attacks can vary based on cultural context (Clark-Parsons, 2019). These vulnerabilities and fears can significantly deter victims/survivors from participating in the #MeToo movement (Clark-Parsons, 2019).

Language barriers pose another major obstacle for victims/survivors to participate and have their voices heard in the #MeToo movement, both within their own countries and in the broader international context. This challenge is particularly evident in countries like India, where a multitude of languages are spoken, including 22 national languages and over 19,500 languages in

total (Guha, 2021, p. 8). Consequently, those who do not speak the major languages face additional difficulties in forming networks and establishing connections with others in the movement (Guha, 2021).

The third impediment is the limited accessibility to the internet. The restricted access is particularly pronounced in rural and urban areas, where even feminist activists and journalists encounter difficulties in asserting their presence and utilizing social media platforms effectively (Guha, 2021; O'Halloran, 2022; Andreasen, 2019). Consequently, many victims/survivors face challenges in navigating gendered spaces and establishing connections with other users (Guha, 2021).

The identified barriers underscore the importance of continued research and initiatives aimed at addressing these challenges and fostering more inclusive spaces for all survivors to share their experiences. In the following section, I will explore scholarly literature that examines #MeToo's limitations and inequalities in practice.

- ***Limitations of the #MeToo Movement According to the Literature***

Several studies that have raised critical questions about the #MeToo movement for failing to represent the voices of marginalized victims/survivors consider this to be a significant limitation of #MeToo. These studies specifically focus on the cis-women-centric nature of #MeToo and emphasize the need for greater inclusivity (Kunst et al., 2018; Phipps, 2019; Trott, 2021; Hannem & Schneider, 2022; Huh, 2019). For instance, Kunst et al. (2018) conducted a striking comparison between the #MeToo campaigns in the United States and Norway using an online questionnaire. The findings indicated that participants predominantly perceived #MeToo as a movement devoted to cis-women victims and survivors. Other studies have delved deeper into the reasons for this exclusion within #MeToo, introducing the aspect of race to the conversation (Phipps, 2019; Trott,

2021; Huh, 2019). They reveal that #MeToo has been framed as a movement dedicated (almost) exclusively to white cis-women and, therefore, failed to provide space for others to share their experiences.

Trott's (2021) analysis, for example, examines Milano's tweet and argues that the seemingly inclusive language of "all the women" was strategically used to only "permit white cis-women to come forward" while excluding many individuals (p. 1136). Analyzing a total of 241,361 tweets, the study revealed a significant absence of narratives related to LGBTQI+ experiences. The engagement, such as likes and retweets, for tweets discussing queer experiences was notably low. Trott (2021) suggests that this lack of discussion stems from the context of neoliberal society and colonial discourse that categorizes certain bodies as "unvictimizable" (p. 1138).

Similarly, Phipps (2019) draws attention to the exclusion of LGBTQI+ individuals within the #MeToo movement by arguing two points: First, #MeToo, like other white feminist activism, is deeply rooted in colonial projects and uses similar language and dichotomies. Second, white cis-women are positioned as victims/survivors of #MeToo and have shaped #MeToo narratives around personal pain and individual injuries, diverting attention from structural power and the experiences of non-white homosexual bodies.

As we have examined the limitations of #MeToo movement, it is imperative to turn our attention to the existing gaps within the literature. In the following sections, I will explore some general gaps in the current literature surrounding #MeToo.

2.3. BEYOND WESTERN ANALYSIS

It is important to acknowledge that certain aspects of the #MeToo movement may have received limited attention. Several potential areas that might have not been thoroughly considered include

marginalized narratives, the recognition of Tarana Burke's and Black women's efforts, the victim blaming and victimization process in mainstream media, the intersectional nature of barriers faced by victims/survivors, and the lack of attention to the broader spectrum of online attacks experienced by victims/survivors.

1. Experiences of marginalized victims/survivors: The literature has yet to delve deeply into marginalized individuals' specific experiences and perspectives within the #MeToo movement. Although scholarship has recognized the lack of attention and centrality to the invisible victims/survivors, few studies have centered on the narratives of these victims/survivors' narratives. This could include examining, for example, the more specific challenges faced by women of colour, LGBTQI+ individuals, sex workers, disabled individuals, and other intersectional identities.
2. The contributions of Tarana Burke and black women in #MeToo: Existing literature on the #MeToo movement often fails to recognize the significant contributions and long-standing activism of Black women, specifically Tarana Burke, whose work predated the viral emergence of the hashtag. While studies acknowledge Burke as the originator of the MeToo phrase, there is a need for more engagement with Burke's decade-long efforts and into the specific strategies, challenges, and accomplishments of her work within the context of #MeToo.
3. Victim blaming and the victimization process in mainstream media: Research on media coverage of the #MeToo movement has been largely focused on the portrayal of aggressors or victims/survivors in mainstream media. Nevertheless, little research has been conducted addressing the victimization process and victim-blaming within media narratives. Only a few studies have explored the role of mainstream media, or mass media more broadly, in

perpetuating rape culture and exacerbating the phenomenon of secondary victimization experienced by #MeToo victims/survivors (e.g., Andreasen, 2020; Glos, 2019; Hannem & Schneider, 2022).

4. An intersectional lens to examine victims'/survivors' barriers: There has been limited attention paid to the interconnected nature of barriers faced by victims/survivors, and a failure to reflect on how these barriers can reinforce and intersect. It is crucial to adopt an intersectional lens when analyzing these barriers and avoid considering them in isolation. By recognizing intersectionality, we can gain a deeper understanding of how different forms of oppression, such as racism and ableism, can compound challenges for some victims/survivors.
5. Examining the broader spectrum of online attacks: While a few studies have addressed the risks of cyberbullying and trolling associated with the #MeToo movement, little attention has been paid to the broader spectrum of online attacks that victims/survivors may experience. This includes forms of online aggression such as hate speech, rape threats, hacking, doxing, and sextortion, which can be experienced by individuals who disclose their experiences. These forms of online misogyny must be documented and examined to gauge their impact on #MeToo victims and survivors.

The limited attention to crucial aspects of the #MeToo movement provided above underscores the necessity for further exploration. In the subsequent sections, I will delve deeper into two significant limitations in the existing literature on #MeToo that align with the focus of my thesis: the Western-centric perspective in scholarship on #MeToo and the emphasis on the medium rather than the content of the narratives.

2.4. ETHNOCENTRIC (WESTERN-CENTRED) SCHOLARSHIP ON #METOO

It is crucial to acknowledge that the predominant focus of the existing literature on the #MeToo movement has centered around North America and Europe despite its transnational goals. This geographical bias has resulted in a limited exploration of the movement's manifestations and impacts in other regions of the world. That said, it is important to consider the few existing studies on non-Western #MeToo (e.g., Hasunuma & Shin, 2019; Guha, 2021; Zeng, 2020; Kemp, 2020).

Among these studies, the work of Pallavi Guha is particularly notable. Guha (2021), an intersectional feminist scholar, conducted research on #MeToo in India, with a particular focus on journalism, activism, and transnational feminism. Guha's research involved interviews with feminist activists and journalists in 2016 and 2018, both before and after #MeTooIndia. The aim was to shed light on the fragmented nature of feminist activism in India and the limited coverage in the mainstream media. The study highlighted the exclusion of suburban, rural, and semi-rural experiences in the coverage of #MeToo by Indian newspapers and mainstream media.

In another study, Zeng (2020) conducted research on #MeToo in China, highlighting the inequality and limited accessibility of the movement for marginalized groups in China. Zeng's study revealed that censorship acts as a barrier to unified feminist activism, leading to fragmented online activism within the #MeToo movement in China. As a result, the movement predominantly involves "well-educated and media-savvy elites," while excluding the participation of low-income workers and rural populations (Zeng, 2020, p. 26).

Another non-western study conducted by Hasunuma and Shin (2019) provided valuable insights into the impacts and implications of the #MeToo movement in Japan and South Korea. This research revealed that the mainstream media's limited support significantly affected the

success of the movement in Japan, resulting in fewer women coming forward and a preference for anonymity among victims/survivors.

As we have seen, most of the research in a non-western context is also concerned with the barriers victims/survivors encounter, and the role that mainstream media plays in #MeToo discourse and inclusion. There is still a noticeable gap in analyzing the content of #MeToo tweets and declarations shared by victims/survivors in these countries. Below, I will provide a more detailed explanation of this gap.

2.5. FOCUS ON MEDIUM, NOT CONTENT

Despite some efforts to investigate the content of tweets written by #MeToo victims/survivors, the analysis of such content remains relatively sparse. This double gap—the limited analysis of #MeToo narratives alongside limited non-Western #MeToo examination—in the research area emphasizes the need for further analysis and exploration of the content shared by victims/survivors outside the Western context. This need becomes even more apparent when considering the context of authoritarian societies such as Iran, where participation in such movements and hashtags for consciousness-raising is one of the few available options to highlight the prevalence of sexual assault/harassment.

Research into #MeToo and sexual violence in Iran has been limited; owing to a myriad of political and social factors that are beyond the scope of my research project to unpack. Despite the alarming number of sexual assaults and high rates of harassment in Iran, as well as victim/survivor engagement in global #MeToo, at the time of writing, there is only one academic source on Iranian #MeToo (Kermani & Hooman, 2022). This study focuses on the hashtag #Tajavoz (means #rape in Farsi) during the first three months of the #MeToo movement in Iran. Kermani and Hooman's findings are valuable contributions as they demonstrate a marked tendency among Iranian users to

discuss barriers alongside sharing their personal stories. Many Twitter users shared their initial reasons for not divulging sexual assault, such as fear of rejection and ridicule, the legal system, and risking their family's honour (Kermani & Hooman, 2022).

Although other studies have touched on sexual violence and #MeToo in Iran (e.g., Behboodi-Moghadam et al., 2018; Safari, 2021; Tafakori, 2020), their data was either taken from mainstream media coverage, which is unlikely to be reliable data, or they conducted quantitative analyses of the usage of the #MeToo hashtag without delving into the specific personal experiences. For example, Safari's (2021) analysis of eight months of #MeToo in Iran examined the chronological sequences of victims'/survivors' tweets, focusing on the popularity and attention these declarations garnered as well as the political views of users who reacted most to the disclosures. The findings revealed that most reactions came from users who held opposing political views to the authoritarian regime (Safari, 2021).

Therefore, as a means of filling the gaps mentioned above and keeping in mind that little empirical research has been conducted to address women's experiences, feelings, and concerns, and that the victims'/survivors' declarations are not given enough attention, I aim to explore the representation of Iranian victims/survivors within their #MeToo declarations. I will approach this exploration through the lenses of feminism and symbolic violence—it is to that framework we turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

Theoretical Foundations: Feminism, Symbolic Violence, and Intersectionality

The theoretical backbone of this thesis is feminism with a particular focus on rape myths and intersectionality, with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence being mobilized to 'fill out' some of the conceptual gaps. To begin, I explored the diverse manifestations of feminism and its evolution, while also delving into the concept of rape culture from a feminist perspective. This lays the foundation for my analysis of rape myths, which are categorized into four groups for better understanding and examination. The discussion then shifts to the concept of intersectionality, emphasizing the importance of considering intersecting identities and experiences within the Iranian #MeToo movement. I then turn to examine the theory of symbolic violence as introduced by Pierre Bourdieu. In this section key concepts such as habitus, field, capital, and symbolic power, which are essential for comprehending the operation and effects of symbolic violence are discussed. In building the theoretical framework, these concepts—feminism (rape myths), intersectionality, and symbolic violence—are brought together to provide a robust lens through which to analyze and interpret the declarations of victims/survivors within the Iranian #MeToo context.

3.1. FEMINISM

As a concept that is constantly evolving, there is no simple or straightforward definition of feminism that is widely accepted (hooks, 2000). Since its inception, however, one consistent element of feminism is its concern with issues of inequity and discrimination in the social, political, and personal realms. Both feminist theories and movements seek to investigate the consequences of social constructs, mainstream theorists, gender norms, and gender-specific interests, with the goal of challenging and transforming them. As Ahmed (2000) writes: “Feminist theorizing is not simply important as a way of explaining what is, but as a way of re-making what is” (p.100). It is important to note, however, that the interpretation, choices, and needs of feminists vary, resulting in fragmented groups including "radical feminists, socialist feminists, Marxist feminists, lesbian separatists, and women of color" (Delmar, 2018, p. 9).

The manifestation and division of feminist perspectives can be traced back to the history of women’s organizing (Delmar, 2018). The first wave, which occurred during the 19th and early 20th centuries, primarily focused on securing women's right to vote (Gamble, 2010). The second wave aimed to formulate a liberalization plan to address a wider range of topics, including sexuality, equal treatment in the workplace, and domestic life (Gasztold, 2020). Both the first and second waves of feminism have been criticized for ignoring colonialism and heteropatriarchy and their failure to adequately address the experiences of women of color[19] (Arvin et al., 2013). The third wave of feminism, also known as intersectional feminism, seeks to redefine feminist theories by focusing on various interpretations of the term identity (Arvin et al., 2013; Gasztold, 2020). Notably feminism originated with a primary focus on gender and the liberation of white,

[19] While both the first and second waves of feminism have often been framed as excluding women of color and black women, it is important to acknowledge that women of color and black women have been engaged in feminist activism for decades prior to the third wave (Davis, 1981).

heterosexual, non-disabled, cisgender women from unjust circumstances. In the course of the intervening years however, the scope of feminism has broadened significantly to incorporate a wide range of topics, including intersectionality, postcolonialism, and queer studies, defying a singular limiting definition (Gasztold, 2020; Kavcic, 2020). Adopting a feminist approach to research opens up new explanations, reframes old questions, challenges dominant theories, enhances data-gathering techniques, and shifts the cognitive authority within fields and theories (Anderson, 1995, p. 81). To this end, I will be adopting critical feminism, which aligns predominantly with post-positivism on account of its critique of dominant gendered power relations, exclusion of voices, and rape culture. I will also draw on the concept of rape myths which I will discuss further in this section. First, it is necessary to clarify the concept of rape culture as presented in feminist scholarship.

3.1.1. Rape Culture

Sexual violence has been a significant focus of feminist studies since the 1970s. Indeed, second-wave feminists actively engaged in the identification of explicit and hidden types of violence and tried to provide support for sexual assault victims/survivors (Bruckert & Law, 2018; Galarza Fernández et al., 2016). Concurrently, alongside the study of sexual violence, extensive research has been conducted on the concept of rape culture (Hershcovis et al., 2021). The term 'rape culture' was coined in the 1970s by feminists to name the deeply entrenched beliefs that perpetuate and excuse sexual violence (Skrypnek, 2021); by embracing notions of hegemonic masculinity[20] and

[20] Hegemonic masculinity is the prevailing acceptance of men's power and sexual dominance over women in society (Connell, 1987; Bourdieu, 2001). It embodies the most valued form of masculinity, acting as a reference point for societal expectations of "the male role" (Connell, 2001, p. 17). Hegemonic masculinity shapes the overall gender order, defines "mainstream masculine identity," and exerts an impact on behavior and societal perceptions of success (Derraugh, 2018; Kavcic, 2020, p. 38). It is reinforced by portraying men as naturally aggressive and contributes to the maintenance of patriarchal and/or hierarchical structures (Connell, 1987; Kavcic, 2020).

subscribing to rape myths, society normalizes sexual violence, rationalizes aggressive male behaviour, and depoliticizes and individualizes women's experiences of sexual assault/harassment (Barnett et al., 2016). In essence, rape culture permeates social systems, with its various aspects being distressingly pervasive. These include but are not limited to "victim blaming, sexual objectification, trivializing rape, denying the prevalence of sexual violence, slut-shaming, refusing to recognize the harm caused by certain forms of sexual violence (minimizing sexual violence experiences), and/or some combination of these" (Attenborough, 2014, pp. 183–203).

Rape culture also diminishes women's corporal autonomy, restricting their sense of ownership over their own bodies, and granting men a sense of entitlement to women's bodies (Friedman & Valenti, 2008). In this culture, which is reflected in subtle judgments and stereotypes surrounding women's sexuality, women's ability to control their own sexuality is constrained. Instead, women's bodies have often been the focus of public concern, and regulating them has become a tool of social control (Friedman & Valenti, 2008). It also creates an atmosphere of fear and apprehension for women and girls, affecting their behavior and choices. For example, a fear of rape may restrict women's freedom, shape their decisions, and impose limitations on their daily lives (Derraugh, 2018). In contrast, men generally do not live with the same pervasive fear of rape.

With an aim to oppose this culture, feminists attack the individualization of gender-based violence that isolates victims/survivors and obscures the role of systematic oppression, power relations, and privileges that enable sexual violence (Kavcic, 2020). They reject beauty standards and cultural narratives about female attractiveness that are upheld for the pleasure of heterosexual men, and concurrently condemn both the "ideal victim" concept and the notion of "sexual respectability" (Friedman & Valenti, 2008; Bruckert & Law, 2018).

Moreover, feminists acknowledge that rape culture has a broad range of manifestations, and therefore scholars, in their research, often find it fundamental to tailor their definitions of rape culture to move away from relying on a generalized definition. For example, S. Derraugh (2018) defines rape culture as a practice that devalues femininity, perpetuates hegemonic masculinity, and normalizes violence against women. In Wilz's (2019) work, rape culture is described as the socially ingrained notion that men are entitled to women's bodies, prioritizing men's sexual gratification over women's autonomy and pleasure.

3.1.2. Rape Myths

Given the diverse embodiments of rape culture and the scope limitations of this thesis, the primary focus of this study is to examine rape myths as a tangible manifestation of rape culture. Here, it is essential to emphasize the undeniable role of rape myths in upholding rape culture at both the community and individual levels (Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018). In the following, I will present the most widely accepted rape myths.

The term "rape myth" refers to cultural beliefs that distort the reality of rape by perpetuating false ideas about rape survivors, perpetrators, and the nature of sexual violence itself. From a feminist perspective, rape myths serve to minimize the responsibility of male perpetrators by questioning the actions and behaviors of women who have experienced sexual harassment or assault (Kavcic, 2020). They shift the focus from condemning the offender to scrutinizing and discrediting the survivor (Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018).

Despite the profound impact of gendered violence on women, these assumptions still persist and contribute to the continuation of rape culture (Bruckert & Law, 2018). However, feminism challenges these dominant myths surrounding sexual violence by insisting that sex must be based on mutual consent and enjoyment, not violence and harm. For feminist scholars and

activists, not only is consent the baseline and the fundamental requirement in any sexual encounter, but the onus of getting active consent lies with the person pursuing the sexual act (Friedman & Valenti, 2008).

There are many rape myths that may vary from society to society and are upheld through various beliefs and practices. In the coming section, I outline the most common and widely used myths; however, my analysis will focus on those that are impactful within the Iranian context. Drawing from various scholars (e.g., Payne et al., 1999; Hashmi, 2021; Moor, 2007; Edwards et al., 2011; O'Hara, 2012; Bruckert & Law, 2018; Estrich, 1987) and inspired by Glos (2019), the following prominent rape myths can be identified:

1. Myths of Consent: These myths suggest that acts of sexual violence result from miscommunication regarding consent between men and women. They (falsely) portray men as confused and lacking communication skills when it comes to understanding women's consent (Glos, 2019, pp. 14-16). Examples include: "If you agreed to sex once, then you have consented to sex in the future" (Willows, 2018, p. 21), "When women say no to sex, they really mean yes" (Willows, 2018, p. 44), "If the victim flirts with the person, then they have consented to sexual relations" (Willows, 2018, p. 46).
2. Biological Rape Myths: This myth suggests that men have an uncontrollable desire for sex due to their biological differences with women. For example, "Male sexuality is uncontrollable" (Hashmi, 2021, p. 31), and "Men who are aroused have to have sex" (Willows, 2018, p. 20).
3. Clothing-Related Myths: These myths promote victim-blaming attitudes by attributing blame to the behaviors of survivors who have dressed in a certain way, rather than holding perpetrators accountable (Glos, 2019). Examples include: "When women dress

provocatively that is consent to sexual relations" (Willows, 2018, p. 19), "When women go around braless or wearing short skirts and tight tops, they are just asking for trouble" (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 762).

4. Women's Risky Behaviours Myths: These myths place the blame on victims/survivors by perpetuating the assumption that certain behaviors are inherently risky (for women) (Glos, 2019). Their underlying message is that women should bear the responsibility for avoiding such risks. Examples include: "Sleeping in one's home at night is risky behavior" (Moor, 2007), "Ideal victims do not maintain contact with the perpetrator" (Hashmi, 2021, p. 29), "If the victim drinks alcohol (or takes drugs), then that is consent to sexual relations" (Willows, 2018, p. 68), and "Alcohol fuels sexual assault" (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 763).
5. 'Real Rape' and Real Aggressor Myths: These myths falsely depict sexual violence as perpetrated by strangers rather than acquaintances, friends, or partners. It downplays the reality that sexual violence is often committed by individuals known to the survivor, leading to a misperception of acquaintance rape as less legitimate or severe (Estrich, 1987; Gavey, 2019). What Estrich (1987) refers to as "real rape" aligns with this myth and describes certain criteria and attributes that must be met for an assault to be considered "real."[21] Some of these criteria include the assault being committed by strangers (real perpetrators), taking place outdoors, and resulting in visible violence and injuries. Examples include: "Husbands cannot rape their wives" (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 762), "Most rapes occur in a dark alley by a stranger" (Morgan & Björkert, 2006; Temkin, 2010), and "Perpetrators are deviant racialized and/or mentally ill men; not the guys we know" (Bruckert & Law, 2018, p. 118).

[21] This narrow definition allows many abusers to escape accountability if the assault does not fit these preconceived notions (Estrich, 1987).

Estrich (1987) argues against these 'real rape' and real aggressor myths and highlights that sexual violence can occur without visible physical damage or involve perpetrators known to the victims. She emphasizes the significance of taking all forms of sexual violence seriously and criticizes the concept of "presumed consent" for reinforcing the myth that women are not raped by acquaintances, spouses, or friends, while providing unlimited sexual access for men (Estrich, 1987, p. 72).

Having explored some of the rape myths that perpetuate rape culture, the next section will discuss intersectionality, as we need to acknowledge that the impacts of rape myths on individuals are not uniform or equal.

3.1.3. Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality was first introduced by legal scholar Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) with the aim of understanding and addressing how people's unique identities overlap, interact, and collide to shape their experiences with oppression and power. Crenshaw coined this term to highlight the struggle faced by Black women who face discrimination based on both their race and gender, experiencing what she termed "double discrimination" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149). Like Crenshaw, bell hooks (2000) described violence against women as intersectional, and Collins (1991) similarly describes oppression as interlocking systems perpetuating each other and being inextricably linked. Therefore, the interconnected nature of social identities in shaping sexual violence necessitates a clarification of the relationship between intersectionality and rape culture.

All too often, discussions around rape culture tend to oversimplify the experiences of women of color, failing to consider the unique ways they are conceptualized within this cultural context. It is crucial to recognize that many rape myths have been shaped to target marginalized groups. For instance, the myth that "women enjoy rape" is associated with the hypersexualization

of Black women (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 765). Using an intersectional lens is, therefore, particularly important because the experience and impact of rape culture vary, and different groups of women, including black, indigenous, immigrant, working-class, transgender, and disabled individuals, will have different experiences than those of white middle-class cisgender women.

While feminism and an intersectional lens have been discussed as integral frameworks, a significant gap still exists that symbolic violence may help bridge not only by directing our attention to signs of rape myth conformity, self-blame, and real rape tropes but also shedding light on the often overlooked forms of subtle violence that can shape individuals' experiences, reactions, and emotions. To this end, in the next section we examine Bourdieu's theory and, in particular, his concept of symbolic violence.

3.2 BOURDIEU'S THEORY

Pierre Bourdieu was a French sociologist and anthropologist who developed one of the most powerful approaches to making sense of human reality; he did so by drawing on a range of theories including the work of Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Michel Foucault (Shusterman et al., 1999; Baker, 201; Samuel, 2013). Following in the footsteps of critical sociology and the French school of anthropology, Bourdieu aimed to uncover forms of dominance that arise from the repressive functioning of social order and the regulation of subjects as objects within social processes (Colaguori, 2010). His work puts significant emphasis on the role of incorporation, embodied knowledge, and contexts in shaping individuals' experiences and perceptions of the world (Nicolaescu, 2010).

The notion of symbolic violence plays a central role in Bourdieu's sociological analysis. Bourdieu's symbolic violence requires us first to understand the three concepts of habitus, field, and capital, which are all intrinsically linked. These concepts form the foundation for analyzing

the operation of symbolic violence. In the following section, I will explore these concepts in greater detail and elucidate their relationship to symbolic violence.

3.2.1. Habitus

The concept of habitus has a rich history within philosophical thought. It can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy, particularly the works of Aristotle, as a disposition or acquired character (Nicolaescu, 2010). Bourdieu defines habitus as a set of embodied dispositions that shape an individual's behaviors and practices within social spaces (Weininger, 2003; Connolly & Healy, 2004). These dispositions, including thoughts, perceptions, and actions, are developed and internalized through the process of socialization during childhood and adolescence, becoming an integral part of everyday life (Bourdieu, 1990; Morgan & Björkert, 2006). In other words, the habitus is formed through the process of inculcating certain behaviors over an extended period (Bourdieu, 1990). Habitus formation begins within the family, where individuals learn and adapt various aspects such as rules, posture, language, “aesthetic choices,” and ways of thinking (Samuel, 2013, p. 399). As individuals progress through secondary institutions, such as schools, workplaces, and recreational settings, the habitus continues to evolve (Samuel, 2013). In essence, Bourdieu’s notion of habitus forms a clear path to understanding how people govern themselves and navigate their social worlds (Shusterman et al., 1999).

3.2.2. Fields

In Bourdieu's theory, the "field" refers to a specific space where individuals and groups engage in social interactions and compete for various forms of capital - economic, cultural, social, and symbolic—which are examined in the next section (Ashbolt et al., 2018; Skeggs, 2004). Bourdieu assumes that the field is a prerequisite of the habitus, as the habitus operates and makes sense within specific field contexts (Bourdieu, 1994). Bourdieu emphasizes that participation in a 'field'

requires abiding by and embracing the field's rules which could result in a collective interest among the members of the field to uphold and protect these rules (Swartz, 1997; Ashbolt et al., 2018).

3.2.3. Capital

Bourdieu regards society as a social space where people interact based on their capital (Hallett, 2007). Bourdieu (1984) defines capital as "the set of actually usable resources and powers" that individuals possess to enhance and maintain their position in society (Weininger, 2003, p. 125; Jones, 2015). This includes economic capital (money and material resources), cultural capital (e.g., education, knowledge, resources/privileges in a particular social setting), social capital (e.g., networks and relationships with privileged individuals), and symbolic capital (recognized dispositions or instincts, including prestige, honor, and care which can be seen as a culmination or combination of the other forms of capital) (Hallett, 2007; Nicolaescu, 2010; Bruckert & Law, 2018). Symbolic capital is shaped by "systems of symbolism and meaning," which impose certain dispositions and render them legitimate (Bourdieu, 1987; Jenkins, 1992, p. 144). Individuals gain symbolic capital by participating in activities that align with the established norms and values of their specific social environment, demonstrating both technical proficiency and cultural suitability (Bourdieu, 1991; Samuel, 2013). As symbolic capital is a crucial source of power, Bourdieu argues that individuals are primarily motivated by their desire to accumulate symbolic capital and power rather than altruism, although this may not be consciously acknowledged (Bourdieu, 1990; Nicolaescu, 2010).

What is perhaps most striking about conceptualizing capital notions is the importance of not confining class analysis solely to economic relations but including symbolic and cultural relations (Szeman et al., 2011). In Bourdieu's theory, cultural capital, like other forms of capital, exhibits a hierarchical structure. Indeed, our society is rife with class distinctions, with a perceived

belief in the superiority of middle and upper-class attributes and a corresponding devaluation of those in the working class (Bruckert & Law, 2018). In parallel, these attributes' intersection with other markers of social stratification, such as race, gender, and disability, justifies economic inequity and limited access to opportunities (Bruckert & Law, 2018). This is exemplified in the context of universities, where the pursuit of higher education is often praised, yet practical barriers faced by racialized and working-class women in navigating academic language and norms[22] are frequently overlooked. These challenges can hinder their academic success and motivation to pursue advanced degrees, further marginalizing them as knowledge producers and reinforcing the hierarchical structure of cultural capital (Bruckert & Law, 2018, pp. 32-36).

Bourdieu further contends that all forms of capital are intertwined with legitimacy, and this legitimacy often conceals the underlying power dynamics that enable such impositions (Jones, 2015; Jenkins, 1992). He dubbed this type of power "symbolic power." Below I will elaborate on symbolic power before addressing symbolic violence.

3.2.4. Symbolic Power

Symbolic power is an invisible and often unnoticed or unquestioned form of power that operates through the complicity of those who are subject to it (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 164). It is defined by the relationship between those who exercise power and those who accept it as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1999; Swartz, 1997). Symbolic power involves the capacity to influence by shaping shared representations of the world (Wacquant & Akçaoğlu, 2016). It encompasses the ability to construct, preserve, or change the world by disseminating symbolic frames and collective instruments that form people's cognitive construction of reality (Wacquant & Akçaoğlu, 2016).

[22] Academic language and norms within educational institutions are predominantly shaped by the middle and upper class.

3.2.5. Symbolic Violence

Symbolic violence is a form of non-physical violence that imposes conformity on individuals within their daily lives, contributing to the maintenance of social hierarchy and mechanisms of control (Colaguori, 2010). As Bourdieu (2001) explains: "Symbolic violence is a type of submission, a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition, [more precisely, mis-recognition], recognition or even feeling [and which] grasps the logic of domination exerted in the name of a symbolic principle" (pp. 1-2).

Bourdieu introduced the concept of symbolic violence to explain the silent and often unconscious forms of cultural and social domination that persist in our daily social habits (Nicolaescu, 2010). Symbolic violence, in certain respects, is more powerful than physical violence since it is often perceived as natural or unquestioned; and is deeply embedded in habitus, the internalized dispositions, and structures of thought within individuals (Bourdieu, 1977; Martin et al., 2020). In other words, through experiencing symbolic violence, the oppressed do not recognize their experiences as violence (Martin et al., 2020).

- ***How Symbolic Violence Operates***

Bourdieu asserts that power and dominance exist ubiquitously in society, and symbolic violence is exercised when it encompasses symbolic power that exerts dominance (Bourdieu, 2000). In fact, symbolic violence operates through power imbalances between social groups, particularly when there is a major discrepancy in power between the dominant and the subordinate (Martin et al., 2020).

As noted above, symbolic violence's coercion is subtle. Dominant groups often shape behavior and preserve social hierarchies without explicitly coercing them. Bourdieu highlights

how hidden structures perpetuate social dominance through covert means. He emphasized that symbolic violence involves various mechanisms of communication and cognition through which social control is maintained, including institutions and ideologies (Bourdieu, 2001). Family, the educational system, and the media are three central institutions (fields) and the most important instruments of socialization that facilitate and reproduce symbolic violence (Burke, 2015; Kennelly, 2017; Glennie, 2018; Fernández et al., 2016). These structures softly regulate individuals' behaviors and shape perceptions, emotions, and sense of validation to align with dominant power structures and values (Fernández et al., 2016). In doing so, they utilize numerous mechanisms through which individuals accept, internalize, and perpetuate the power structures or obligations that oppress them (Colaguori, 2010; Ashbolt et al., 2018). Therefore, by accepting and reproducing dominant symbols, norms, and language, individuals unknowingly contribute to their own subordination. As Bourdieu emphasizes, symbolic violence relies on the cooperation of those who experience it—voluntary submission is both crucial, and unnoticed (Bourdieu, 2001; Colaguori, 2010).

As the process of normalization happens through institutional language, habitual procedures, and socialization, Bourdieu emphasizes that understanding symbolic violence requires considering it within the context of a social system or fields, where individuals conform to cultural codes of conduct and adhere to prescribed behavioral norms based on their social class, gender, race, or other markers of social identity (Bourdieu, 2000; Martin et al., 2020; Colaguori, 2010). In fact, he emphasizes that to shed light on symbolic violence, we need to examine the institutional language, procedures, and representations that normalize these codes or norms as habitus and natural, based on their context (Bourdieu, 2000).

An example of symbolic violence can be observed in the juridical field. Where firstly, legal rules, processes, and hierarchy are accepted as natural and legitimate, granting them symbolic power over individuals' lives (Bourdieu, 1987; Weir, 2020). Secondly, individuals are required to conform to the dominant language and binary logic of the juridical field, which often oversimplifies the complexity of their experiences (Cohen, 2017). Consequently, in order to navigate the field successfully, legal professionals and attorneys unknowingly adhere to the legitimate language and structures without recognizing their contribution to the reproduction of symbolic violence within the juridical field (Weir, 2020).

- ***Symbolic Violence Effects and Gaps***

Symbolic violence's effects and results are far-reaching and deeply embedded in individuals' subjective experiences (Colaguori, 2010). These effects manifest through the voluntary submission of individuals to relations of domination, which means that social actors become entangled in relations that undermine their agency and aspirations while reinforcing social subordination (Ashbolt et al., 2018; Connolly & Healy, 2004). For instance, within a gendered society, symbolic violence can be seen in how women conform to gender stereotypes and expectations they are assigned, adhering to the culture of hegemonic masculinity or internalized oppression (Kavcic, 2020).

Moreover, individuals who experience symbolic violence often feel anxiety, shame, and limited agency (Samuel, 2013). They experience both objective hardships and subjective experiences of self-blame, hesitation, and self-censorship (Samuel, 2013). These oppressed individuals may struggle to construct appropriate actions due to the unavailability of necessary resources, while simultaneously recognizing and internalizing the rules of distinction that exclude and dominate them (Samuel, 2013). More importantly, challenging this oppression and making

changes is a difficult and slow process since distinction rules are justified, normalized, and hidden (Martin et al., 2020).

It is fair to acknowledge, however, that symbolic violence, like other theoretical concepts, has its critics. Some argue that Bourdieu's theory lacks attention to social change and overwhelmingly focuses on social reproduction (Adkins, 2004; see also McNay, 1999). Feminist scholars also critique Bourdieu's theory for its limited consideration of women's resistance to gender norms. Skeggs (2012) suggests that Bourdieu's theoretical framework neglects to consider emotions such as rage, frustration, fear, and anger. These emotions are vital aspects of contemporary society and have historically been central to feminist theory (Adkins, 2004). The discussion now turns to how my theoretical framework addresses these concerns and attempts to bind any remaining gaps and limitations.

3.3. BUILDING A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In mapping out the theoretical framework utilized in this study, it is essential to bring feminism (rape myths), symbolic violence, and intersectionality into a meaningful conversation. I now turn to a discussion around the mobilization of these three concepts to explore their interconnections both in relation to one another and the subject matter at hand.

We start by recognizing the relationship that exists between feminism and symbolic violence. Feminist theory embodies a goal-oriented mindset that identifies and critiques the binary division, gendered dominance (hegemonic masculinity), and rape culture present in any social structure (McCall, 1992; Anderson, 1995). Concurrently, symbolic violence for Bourdieu is, in its most basic form, an unequal relationship, a power imbalance that involves voluntary submission to dominance. Feminist theorists are mainly concerned with the hierarchical implications of divisions, and sexism; rather, Bourdieu (2001) focuses on how this gendered distinction plays a

role in legitimizing and normalizing power relations. As described above, symbolic violence manifests through the internalization of beliefs and values that contradict individuals' lived experiences, shaping their perception of what is thinkable and unthinkable (Kennelly, 2016). Accordingly, self-blame, self-objectification, and the perception of sexual assault as "just the way things are" are examples of symbolic violence and are indicative of the deeply entrenched myths surrounding sexual assault/harassment (Bruckert & Law, 2018; Martin et al., 2020). In this way, both theories attempt to elaborate on how social structures are inherently hierarchical and, in doing so, turn attention to power imbalance, the process of naturalization, and dominant gendered discourses (Delmar, 2018; Bourdieu, 2001).

Hence, I believe incorporating feminism and symbolic violence theories into my research may help fill the gaps that have persisted within each perspective. Although Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence has relatively little affinity with feminism, I believe that focusing on forms of sexual violence discourses—invisible and rooted in habitus—in tandem with feminist theory, specifically the rape myths concept, will support my argument (Adkins, 2004). However, it is important to note that these theories do not account for the ways in which rape myths and symbolic violence are affected by racism, classism, heteronormativity, and ableism, and how this impacts survivors' experiences, their ability to narrate and participate in #MeToo (Crenshaw, 1991). To address this, employing an intersectional lens will enable a more accurate reflection on the complex challenges victims/survivors face. An intersectional analysis reveals the deeper levels of bias and policy at play in Iranian society by focusing on the specific intersecting marginalizations experienced by #MeToo victims/survivors. In Iran, similar to any other location, it is evident that the experiences of survivors of sexual violence are influenced by factors such as gender, sexuality,

class, ethnicity, religion, and geographical location. Therefore, in my research, incorporating an intersectional lens becomes valuable.

By bridging the gap between feminism (rape myths) and Bourdieu's theory, while incorporating the notion of intersectionality, my theoretical framework offers an enriched interdisciplinary approach to understanding the complexities of victims'/survivors' experiences and interpreting my data effectively. To unpack my findings, I will now proceed to outline my methodology and describe the data collection process.

CHAPTER FOUR

Methodology: Framework, Objectives, and Process

For this research project, I employ qualitative content analysis, known as thematic analysis. This chapter begins with a concise description of thematic analysis. Next, the reasons for, and advantages of adopting thematic analysis are explored. I then outline the thesis's specific goals and aims before including the process of applying the thematic analysis method, from data collection to the coding process and creating themes. These steps prepare the data for in-depth analysis. Finally, the chapter will conclude by reflecting on the challenges encountered during the research process.

4.1. WHAT IS THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that involves identifying and analyzing significant themes or patterns within a body of textual data (McAllum et al., 2019; Gaudet & Robert, 2018; Mogashoa, 2014; Leavy, 2007; Willows, 2018). It is commonly used to uncover the underlying meanings, ideas, and concepts in qualitative data, aiming to organize and make sense of the salient emerging themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Howitt & Cramer, 2016). Indeed, thematic analysis often exceeds the mere description and reporting of patterns and allows researchers to interpret complex aspects of the research topic (McLeod, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bazeley, 2021).

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis can be conducted at two interpretative levels: semantic and latent. A semantic approach focuses on identifying themes within the explicit or surface meanings of the data, without seeking any hidden or deeper significance beyond what participants have explicitly stated or what has been written. In contrast, a latent approach goes beyond the surface-level meanings of the data. It involves examining the underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualizations, and ideologies that are believed to shape or inform the content of the data (Boyatzis, 1998; Morabito, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). The latent level aims to elucidate the deeper layers of meaning and understand the broader contexts and influences that contribute to participants' perspectives or the text being analyzed (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this research project, the latent interpretive approach is employed.

Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that the "latent" approach to thematic analysis can be conducted within any epistemological framework, provided it aligns with the research question and study objectives. However, they suggest that the latent approach tends to be more consistent with a constructionist perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the constructivist paradigm, experiences are seen as socially constructed and continually recreated rather than being inherent or fixed (Burr, 1995). As such, researchers are encouraged to examine the sociocultural contexts and structural conditions that shape experiences. The constructivist paradigm is particularly relevant to my research inquiry as it allows for an exploration of how victims/survivors navigate socially constituted ideas surrounding rape, sexual harassment/assault, and whether declarations reproduce rape myths. Additionally, as discussed in the theory section, a critical paradigm is necessary to analyze power relations and dominant

constructions related to sexual harassment/assault. Therefore, the epistemological standpoint for this research is that of a critical constructivist.

4.2. ADVANTAGES OF THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis is regarded as a fundamental and versatile method for qualitative analysis. It serves as a foundational approach that researchers should prioritize learning, as it equips them with essential skills applicable to various other forms of qualitative analysis (Holloway & Todres, 2003; Bazeley, 2021). One of its significant advantages is its flexibility to operate within different theoretical frameworks. Unlike some other methods, thematic analysis is not bound to any pre-existing theoretical framework, making it adaptable and applicable to various theoretical perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This adaptability allows it to be effectively utilized within the critical feminist and symbolic violence framework, enabling an examination of how rape myths and symbolic power impact declarations.

4.3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main research question guiding this study is: How do Iranian victims/survivors represent their declarations in the context of the #MeToo #من-هم movement?

To address this question, this research project has two goals. First, it aims to explore the themes emerging from the content shared by victims/survivors in their declarations. Second, it seeks to examine the socially constructed nature of these emerging themes considering the socio-cultural context, gendered environments, sexist premises, and power relations at play. To achieve these objectives, as previously stated, a critical constructivist epistemology[23] is employed in tandem with thematic analysis. This approach is instrumental in uncovering how discourses,

[23] My epistemological approach aligns with the concepts of symbolic violence, feminism, and intersectionality.

situations, and processes contribute to the construction of certain meanings and similar themes. As such, it sheds light on how individuals construct their experiences and represent themselves.

It is essential to clarify that this thesis does not question whether the declarations are true or false. As Bruner (2002) reminds us, narratives can vary in their level of believability. Instead, this study centers on the themes that emerge from the #Metoo declarations of Iranian victims/survivors, investigating how the women choose to persuade their audience and how their stance reflects their perception of discourses surrounding sexual harassment/assault. The intention is to explore whether their perceptions differ from or align with those outlined in the existing literature on the #MeToo movement.

4.4. DATA COLLECTION/ SAMPLING

Generally, the first step in qualitative research analysis involves the collection of raw data. To gather my corpus, I compiled all the declarations posted on Twitter by three feminist accounts using the hashtags #MeToo, #آزار_روایت ،#منـهم ،#تجاوز ،#آزارجنسی which, when translated from Farsi to English, mean #narrativeofabuse, #sexualharassment, #rape, and #metoo respectively. These accounts are *Bidarzani* (https://twitter.com/Bidarzani), *harasswatch* (https://twitter.com/harasswatch), and #من_هم (https://twitter.com/me_too_iran).

The data collection process was conducted rigorously. To ensure all declarations were gathered I used the advanced search feature to search the Twitter accounts from August 2020—marking the beginning of the #MeToo movement in Iran—until August 2022. A total of 124 verified declarations from this period formed my data set. This timeframe is particularly significant for several reasons. First, it encapsulates the initial wave of the #MeToo movement, in which

transpired between August and November 2020. Second, there were notable peaks in the #MeToo movement, with one occurring in April 2021 and another between January and May 2022[24].

After collecting the data, I undertook a cross-verification of each declaration on the feminist organizations' Instagram accounts[25] to ensure comprehensive coverage over two years. All declarations were transcribed into individual Word files and given a number—cited in the thesis as (MD, number), where MD stands for MeToo Declaration—based on their chronological order of disclosure. This chronological alignment was also double-checked by comparing both the Twitter and Instagram accounts.

The choice to use feminist accounts as data sources was due to Iran's government cyber army, which employs fake accounts to disseminate misinformation on social media platforms. Therefore, to ensure the authenticity of the collected data and mitigate the impact of counterfeit accounts, these particular feminist accounts[26] were selected for data sampling. In addition, except for a few declarations during the initial months, which were initially posted by victims'/survivors' accounts and then subsequently deleted—likely due to received threats—the vast majority of #MeToo declarations were disseminated through these feminist accounts to provide anonymity and protection for victims/survivors. It is evident that due to anonymity and public sharing of these declarations, no ethical considerations were necessary. However, the possible challenge was the vagueness surrounding the specific criteria employed by these feminist accounts when selecting declarations for sharing.

[24] The latter period culminated in March 2022 with a significant event—the joint statement by actresses and female directors in the cinema industry. This statement, endorsed by 800 women working in the cinema sector, demonstrated their solidarity with female colleagues who had previously shared their experiences of sexual harassment/assault. Notably, among these 800 women, those with Instagram accounts simultaneously published this statement on their pages, making it an impactful moment within the #MeToo movement in Iran.

[25] Cross-verification was facilitated as they had posted all declarations as slides on their Instagram accounts.

[26] The moderators of these accounts verify the victims'/survivors' narratives prior to sharing them.

4.5. CODING PROCESS

The coding strategy employed in this thesis draws upon thematic analysis, which shares similarities with the phases of other qualitative methodologies (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gaudet & Robert, 2018; Holloway & Todres, 2003). Specifically, the coding approach proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006) is utilized. The initial step involved a comprehensive review of the entire data set to gain familiarity with its contents, develop an overall understanding, and identify patterns and connections among events (Nowell et al., 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gaudet & Robert, 2018). This review process enabled me to realize a holistic grasp of the data (Matheson, 2021). Next, I imported all the Word files into NVivo software, which I utilized to facilitate the coding process. The initial codes were generated through a line-by-line examination, focusing on noteworthy attributes observed within the declarations. These initial codes consisted of concise one-sentence statements or single words that captured recurring meanings across the data set. This process, known as "induction" or data-driven coding, allowed for the emergence of themes directly from the data itself (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gaudet & Robert, 2018; Attride-Stirling, 2001).

Of course, as I generated these codes, my process was informed by the insights gained from the literature review, relevant theories, and my personal experiences as an Iranian woman (McAllum et al., 2019). This process, known as "deduction," involves applying existing knowledge and theoretical frameworks to the coding process (Kim, 2016; Robert & Shenhav, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gaudet & Robert, 2018). This combination of approaches, known as the "abductive" process, allowed me to employ both inductive and deductive strategies (Gaudet & Robert, 2018, p. 11). As such, the deduction process ran in parallel with the induction process, ensuring that researcher predictions and theoretical concepts could indeed be found within the data

(McAllum et al., 2019; Gaudet & Robert, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, recurring codes such as "vulnerability," "fear," "entitlement," and "self-blame" emerged from the data through an abductive process; I was coding while being influenced by the existing literature and theories, specifically power imbalance, hegemonic masculinity, and victim-blaming, which are central to feminist theory.

To ensure the accuracy of the codes, each code was thoroughly reviewed (Glos, 2019). Any codes that were irrelevant or required modification due to contradictions were eliminated (Gaudet & Robert, 2018; Glos, 2019). Importantly, as emphasized by Braun and Clarke (2006), this process is not a linear progression from one phase to the next. Instead, it is a recursive process that involves moving back and forth between phases as needed.

Up to this point, with an iterative research model and an abductive reasoning approach I examined the data. In the following section, I provide a detailed account of how themes were derived from the codes.

4.6. CREATING THEMES/ANALYSIS

After completing the vertical coding process, I had a long list of codes. To identify the core themes[27] of the Iranian #MeToo movement, I synthesized these codes into potential themes (nodes) using NVivo, considering their characteristics, meaning, and relationships. For instance, codes like "self-blame," "responsibility," "suppressing doubt," and "shame" were all grouped under the node (theme) of "women's reproduction of rape myths," and specifically categorized under the sub-theme "victims are culpable/complicit."

[27] A theme refers to an extended phrase or sentence that captures the essence of what a unit of data is about and/or what it signifies (Morabito, 2021).

Once the core themes and sub-themes were identified, and the initial codes were organized under each theme, I conducted a two-level review. First, using a vertical reviewing approach, I examined each theme and the collated codes associated with it. This process allowed me to gain a comprehensive understanding of each theme and its constituent codes. Then, I carried out a contextual analysis, which involved thinking through confirmed themes in relation to the literature, context, and theoretical concepts. This step aimed to determine the consistency of the empirical data with pre-existing themes or concepts and to further refine the themes based on this reflection (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gaudet & Robert, 2018).

Throughout the process of reviewing and refining the themes, I made adjustments to the categorization or conceptualization of nodes and themes as needed. For example, I identified a set of codes, such as "young age," "anti-regime discourse," and "PTSD," that did not fit into any existing themes, and I excluded them from the analysis. Additionally, some sub-themes appeared to overlap, such as "manipulation tactics" and "lack of knowledge," which were both recognized as barriers by victims/survivors. In response, I merged these sub-themes into a single category labeled "lack of knowledge."

Upon finalizing the themes, I translated them word-for-word into English. I then approached the main research question by analyzing the findings through the theoretical framework—symbolic violence and intersectionality. By adopting an abductive approach to analyze the data, I was able to discuss the main research question by making sense of the data inductively while simultaneously testing the validity of new interpretations deductively in light of existing knowledge.

4.7. CHALLENGE/STRUGGLE

Before concluding this chapter, it is worth reflecting on some of the challenges I encountered while examining the declarations of Iranian victims/survivors. First, these declarations were emotionally intense and often overwhelming. Each review and return to them felt as challenging as the first encounter. Throughout the coding process, I struggled to maintain my motivation and take care of my mental well-being. Second, since all my declarations were in Farsi, and some of the words had specific contextual nuances, given my commitment to preserving the original declaration's subtleties I sometimes struggled to find accurate and equivalent translations.

In this chapter, I have discussed my methodology for this research project, including its advantages and applicability to my research goals. I have also detailed the process of sampling, coding, and creating themes. Having laid out the methodology, I will proceed to present my findings.

CHAPTER FIVE

Identifying the Themes: Sexual Purity or Inherently Violent?

This chapter presents the research findings derived from Iranian #MeToo declarations. As I was analyzing my data, the intricate power dynamics became palpable in all the declarations, shedding light on the hierarchical and multifaceted ways power operates within the context of sexual violence. A detailed analysis of this pivotal aspect will be reserved for the subsequent chapter. For now, I focus on delving into the core of the results, commencing with the descriptive overview of the codes, followed by the explanation of the four predominant themes[28] that emerged from the data: 'Men's Regulation of Women's Sexuality,' 'Women's Reproduction of Rape Myths,' 'Barriers Encountered,' and 'Sisterhood: Empowerment Through Shared Experiences.'

5.1. DESCRIPTIVE OVERVIEW

Before unpacking the specific results of my analysis of the Iranian #MeToo movement, it is worthwhile to discuss some overarching aspects. First, a consistent pattern is observed in most declarations; women began by providing the date of the incident and their age at the time. They

[28] Appendix (A) supplements this chapter with a chart and table, illustrating how these four themes emerged prominently and were extensively coded, indicating their significant connection to the majority of the data. Also, the provided table displays the number of codes associated with each theme.

often elaborated on the circumstances of their encounters with the aggressors (they were all heterosexual), whether it involved a situation where they initially trusted the individuals based on their prior interactions or if the assailants were strangers. Second, the women's descriptions of their educational background, profession, internships, and even therapeutic experiences reflected their educated middle-class status. The women predominantly came from urban areas and communicated in the official language (Farsi). In a few instances where rural hometowns were mentioned, social class was indicated through the level of education, volunteer work, awareness of the notion of consent, understanding of women's rights, familiarity with the #MeToo movement, and digital literacy.

Accordingly, the majority of Iranian #MeToo declarations reflect something we saw in the #MeToo movement literature: marginalized women's voices have not been included (Kunst et al., 2018; Trott, 2021; Hannem & Schneider, 2022). Just as we have discussed the influence of white women and the Western media's framing of #MeToo as exclusively for privileged women (De Benedictis et al., 2019; Hannem & Schneider, 2022; Leung & Williams, 2019; Zeng, 2020), the dominance of educated, middle-class, Farsi-speaking women seems evident in the Iranian context. Out of 124 declarations, only six appeared to come from rural backgrounds (e.g., MD, 2; MD, 49; MD, 53; MD, 61; MD, 78; MD, 119), hinting at a potential divide between urban and rural women on these feminist online platforms. This exclusion will be further examined in relation to the concept of intersectionality in the next chapter.

5.2. THEME #1: MEN'S REGULATION OF WOMEN'S SEXUALITY

The theme of "Men's Regulation of Women's Sexuality" in #MeToo declarations, which encompasses a complex interplay of societal norms, the legal system, religious interpretations, and

gendered discourses, includes instances where men asserted authority over women's sexual agency (often driven by a patriarchal construct that places emphasis on women's virginity). These instances also reveal cases where men sought to dictate and define women's sexual behaviors often through misusing entrenched cultural beliefs, feminism, and notions of modesty or modernity.

Women participating in #MeToo described varied situations in which men ignored their lack of consent and pressured them into sexual activities. This occurred in many ways, from manipulation, shaming, guilting, and humiliation to control, coercion, and threats, depending on the nature of their relationship with the aggressor. Therefore, this theme has been categorized based on women's relationships with aggressors, since specific tactics were employed accordingly. In the next two sub-themes (*Men's Sexual Entitlement to Their Partners* and *Men Mobilizing Sexual Autonomy Narratives*), I will elaborate on how men mobilize these mechanisms to regulate women's sexuality.

5.2.1. Sub-Theme #1: Men's Sexual Entitlement to Their Partners

There were a number of declarations that highlighted men's perception that they were entitled to sexual relations with their partners and girlfriends. Women whose aggressors were their boyfriend or fiancés[29] expressed the challenges of rejecting sexual advances (e.g., MD, 4; MD, 10; MD, 17; MD, 22; MD, 24; MD, 45; MD, 48; MD, 51; MD, 79; MD, 106). This was manifested in men's disregarding the need for consent, dismissing women's refusals and preferences, and forcing their partner to engage in sexual activity (e.g., MD, 8; MD, 16; MD, 54; MD, 56; MD, 88; MD, 95). A significant aspect of this entitlement can be traced back to the concept of "Tamkin," we explored

[29] There were no declarations acknowledging rape or sexual violence within a marital relationship throughout the two-year sample of the #Metoo movement for this thesis.

in Chapter One, where we delved into Iran's legal system and its controversial laws: Article 1108 of Iranian law unequivocally grants men the unlimited right to sex from their wives.

In the declarations women described that the men pressured and obliged them through tactics such as using biological myths, guilt, relentless insistence, and persuading women that they also desire intimacy. For example, one declaration recounted a situation in which a woman's fiancé requested penetration, and despite her repeated refusals, he persisted until she agreed to non-penetrative sex. The woman described: "During the night, he repeatedly urged me to engage sexually, using humor and playful language. He claimed his need for sex to relax mentally, and when I declined, he compelled me into using my hand, and ultimately I did it" (MD, 51). Such instances obliquely reflect the biological myth, mentioned earlier in both Chapter One: *Iranian Sociopolitical Landscape: Women's Rights and Challenges* and Chapter Two: *Literature Review: What the Scholarship Says about #MeToo,* that men possess an innate, uncontrollable urge for sexual satisfaction due to biological differences.

Other declarations show that women in committed relationships found themselves torn between their partner's demands and their own feelings. Women's declarations frequently highlighted that men's desires take precedence over women's consent within intimate relationships. Examples can be found in Declarations 24 where a woman shared her partner's repeated pleas for sex: "He begged so much that I accepted sex with him out of love and compassion, maybe I considered it was my duty" (MD, 24; also MD 17). This sense of duty and responsibility towards the aggressor's well-being should be understood contextually; it both resonates with the concept of "Tamkin" and is also tied to specific interpretations of Sharia law and Quranic passages that emphasize a wife's responsibility for ensuring her husband's sexual contentment.[30]

[30] Also, the men's expectation of getting pleased reinforces gendered roles and notions of "good girls" who prioritize their partner's needs over their own.

5.2.2. Sub-Theme #2: Men Mobilizing Sexual Autonomy Narratives

The second theme that emerged from the data was men's control over women's sexual experiences and autonomy. Women described situations where men (who were not their partner) used established discourses in a manipulative way to dictate how and when women should have sex. Testimonies from victims/survivors were grouped into the following two sub-themes: *Feminist Sexual Liberation Discourse*, and *Virginity Discourse.*

- ***Feminist Sexual Liberation Discourse***

Women's narratives reveal instances where certain aggressors, even renowned women's rights activists, exploited their positions and subjected feminist women to humiliation by saying that rejecting men sexually signifies a failure to embrace feminist principles. These men insinuated that such women are 'backward' and regressive (e.g., MD, 4; MD, 14; MD, 18; MD, 22; MD, 60; MD, 78; MD, 102; MD, 115). For instance, in Declaration 14, a woman described her experience with Kamil Ahmadi, an anthropologist and women's rights advocate, who criticized her for declining his suggestion to have a one-night stand. She recounted, "rape was not my experience. I faced sexual harassment, unwanted touches, and hurtful remarks like 'rural,' 'narrow-minded,' and 'you are a feminist who ignores her body's needs.' He said, 'Suppressing yourself means suppressing other women's needs.' I felt humiliated" (MD, 14).

In another case, a woman who had been in a situationship[31] with Navid Yousefian, a Ph.D. graduate from the University of California—a man who presents himself as a feminist activist on social media—described:

[31] A situationship is a type of relationship that does not fit the traditional definition of a committed partnership. It describes a connection between individuals that is emotionally charged, yet lacks the formal commitment (Peel, 2023). Situationships are often characterized by ambiguity and can resemble other non-committal relationship labels like "friends with benefits," "booty calls," or one-night stands (Peel, 2023, p. 3).

> I shared all these stories because I liked Navid. In our conversations, he brushed off my experiences of sexual harassment and even went so far as to claim that our issue was that "you weren't as sexually dirty as I am." His intent behind this sentence was to express his sexual openness, suggesting that I couldn't match it. He made me feel humiliated and somehow stigmatized,[32] even though he never explicitly uttered these words. He consistently implied that I misinterpreted things and accused me of having a negative view of him… (MD, 102).

- ***Virginity Discourse***

Another discourse that was wielded by men as a tool to regulate women's sexuality, limit their autonomy and power over their own bodies, was virginity—using this discourse exposes a catch-22—women can face humiliation both for not being virgins and for being virgins.

On the one hand, women's testimonies depicted a pervasive fear and shame surrounding the loss of virginity. These emotions are deeply ingrained within the fabric of cultural, religious, and traditional norms, many of which are shaped and reinforced by men. This was earlier elucidated in Chapter One: *Iranian Sociopolitical Landscape: Women's Rights and Challenges*, where we explored the moral significance attached to preserving one's virginity and the severe stigma associated with women who lose their virginity outside of marriage. Some declarations highlighted this reality where, even after experiencing rape, women faced further humiliation from men due to the perception that they were not virgins (e.g., MD, 2; MD, 3; MD, 4; MD, 26). In one declaration, the victim/survivor explained: "When he was done, the remark he made was utterly demeaning. He said: Your legs' movements show that you were not entirely inexperienced." (MD,

[32] There is a Persian word that lacks a direct English equivalent; nevertheless, the closest translation would be "backward" and "narrow-minded" in terms of reluctance to embrace new and modern things.

3). Another example demonstrated similar humiliation and verbal assault: “I don't want to describe the details. He raped me. It was my first sexual experience. However, after raping me, his words were like a second rape; he said: ‘It's obvious that this is your job, and it wasn't your first time’ (MD, 2). The perpetrator's verbal engagement speaks to a manipulative attempt to shift the blame and discredit the survivor's experience.

On the other hand, there are also instances where women faced ridicule for being virgins (e.g., MD, 42; MD, 74; MD, 105, MD, 106). For example, a female student of Film Studies shared her experience of being mocked by her teacher for her virginity. She recounted:

> I mentioned having low self-esteem, and out of nowhere, he looked at me and asked, “Is it because you don't have sex? Are you a virgin?” I was taken aback and simply said, “What?” He repeated the question, “Are you a virgin?” I responded, “Yes.” He then remarked, “That's a big mistake, being a virgin at your age, it's almost like a sickness. It's not like this abroad.” He inquired further, “Do you have a boyfriend?” I answered, “Yes.” He insisted, “You definitely need to have this experience with someone new.” It was clear he meant himself, as he continued emphasizing this point. (MD, 105)

Another woman made the following declaration: "After that night, as I hadn't been returning his calls, he insisted on meeting to resolve the misunderstanding. However, he didn't seek a solution; instead, he belittled me, making a big deal about me being a virgin until the age of twenty-seven. He said, 'I thought you were joking about being a virgin'" (MD, 106).

5.3. THEME #2: WOMEN’S REPRODUCTION OF RAPE MYTHS

Given the pervasiveness of the rape myths examined in Chapter Three: *Theoretical Foundations: Feminism, Symbolic Violence, and Intersectionality*, it is perhaps unsurprising that some of these myths found their way into the declarations. In particular, the following four themes, which evoke

myths in the theory chapter, were in evidence: *"Real" Rapes Are Committed by Real Aggressor, Men's Sexuality Is Uncontrollable, "Real" Rapes Are Violent and Result in Visible Injuries,* and *Victims Are Culpable/Complicit.*

5.3.1. Sub-Theme #1: "Real" Rapes Are Committed by Real Aggressor

Women's trust in acquaintances and family members, and their reluctance to see certain men as potential perpetrators align with the discussed myth in the Theoretical Foundations Chapter that "real" rapes are those that are committed by strangers and, relatedly, that there is a certain type of man that commits sexual assault—racialized, deviant, mentally ill men; not the guys we know (Bruckert & Law, 2018, p. 118). Victims'/survivors' initial doubt in cases of acquaintances showed acceptance of real aggressor myths which were backed up by reasons such as: "he was my father's friend/he was like my father to me" (MD, 9; MD, 71; See also in MD, 72; MD, 119), "he was my teacher for many years" (MD, 11; See also in MD, 76; MD, 115), "he was famous and well-known" (MD, 44; See also in MD, 7; MD, 17; MD, 22; MD, 98; MD, 116; MD, 124), "he was religious" (MD, 111; See also in MD, 8; MD, 114; MD, 118), "he was a feminist and women's rights activist" (MD, 14; See also in MD, 7; MD, 102; MD, 106; MD, 112). For example, one victim/survivor shared their experience grappling with doubt and repressing negative emotions regarding an assault by a therapist who held a fatherly role in their life:

> I trusted Dr. Adel like I trusted my father. One day, at the end of our session, he hugged me strangely, and held me by the waist tightly. His gaze was different and not with the usual paternal warmth, I pulled my head back, while his other hand went into my hair and I felt uncomfortable but didn't understand what happened until I told my friends. They were shocked, and then I realized something was really wrong. At first, I tried to justify it as a test, convincing myself and my friends that it might have been some form of

> psychological test, but slowly, I felt anxious around any man I saw as a father figure. It took me two years of therapy to finally feel brave enough to tell my story. (MD, 72)

Another example that illustrates how tightly embedded this myth can be is the case where a woman shared her initial impression of a man referred to as B.A.: "This person's life seemed very reasonable. At first glance, he was a rational and intelligent person, an intellectual artist, fond of reading and books. He had an attractive personality" (MD, 22). She then explained how her trust in B.A. led her to a [emotional] relationship with him based on his public image. For many years, the woman had been sexually assaulted in this relationship, and several years later, she realized that B.A. had been involved with 72 other sexual partners, all of whom had experienced severe violence. This revelation made her realize she had been ensnared in a violent relationship with a serial aggressor. She highlighted that many of these women had similarly trusted B.A. due to his reputation. This declaration underscores the extent to which the *Real Aggressor Myths* influenced victims and survivors, even leading some to remain in abusive relationships characterized by repeated sexual violence.

5.3.2. Sub-Theme #2: Men's Sexuality Is Uncontrollable

We have already seen that perpetrators deployed the myths of "male sexuality is uncontrollable" (Hashmi, 2021, p. 31) and "men who are aroused have to have sex" (Willows, 2018, p. 20) in relation to perpetrators' strategies to control women's sexuality; it is notable that these myths also have appeared in the women's own behaviors. In the data analyzed for this thesis, these myths become manifested in women's uncertainty about refusing or not speaking out against unwanted sexual advances (MD, 16; MD, 54; MD, 56; MD, 95; MD, 112). For instance, one victim/survivor shared, "As he was driving me home, he touched my hand and body, insisting that he loved me. Although I felt uncomfortable, I dismissed the issue. I attributed it to his excessive interest in me"

(MD, 59). Another explained, "I was so shocked by the sudden change in his behavior that I interpreted his aggression and desire as intense interest and longing. Although he never allowed me to express whether I wanted to continue with sexual activity or not, I suppressed my negative feelings" (MD, 112). Additionally, one woman wrote, " As a young girl with limited experience, I didn't know how to respond. Unfortunately, I accompanied him out of confusion, hoping to satisfy him and calm the situation" (MD, 16). In these descriptions, the participants' uncertainty about rejecting sexual advances is reflected in their language and actions, reinforcing the notion that men's sexual desire is uncontrollable.

5.3.3. Sub-Theme #3: "Real" Rapes Are Violent and Result in Visible Injuries

Reflecting the myth that 'real' rapes are violent and result in injury, several women in this study also expressed uncertainty regarding defining their unwanted or coercive sexual encounters as rape or sexual assault (e.g., MD, 10; MD, 17; MD, 52, MD, 74). Declaration 17 described an incident in which the woman had indeed been raped in a scenario where, despite showing her disapproval, the perpetrator engaged in sexual activity. However, because his action neither wholly with force nor resulted in severe physical violence she did not define it as sexual assault and instead, referred to herself as being deceived. Similarly, Declaration 10 indicated ambiguity surrounding how to name an experience: "Was it by force? Was it rape? I don't know, even after all these years. But he slowly persuaded me. I was afraid. I was both troubled and anxious. I don't recall the details; it's as if I've deliberately forgotten". She added, "Sometimes I wish the savagery had been more explicit, but he took advantage of my vulnerability, leading me there of my own volition. I wish it had been by force."

5.3.4. Sub-Theme #4: Victims Are Culpable/Complicit

Survivors/victims in my data vividly replicate feelings of guilt and question if they were complicit. Within their declarations, women often detailed their struggles with these emotions, describing how they accepted culpability for the assault, questioned their own behaviors, and/or remained silent after the assault due to the fear of societal judgment (e.g., MD, 7; MD, 10; MD, 11; MD, 13; MD, 15; MD, 19; MD, 21; MD, 43; MD, 53; MD, 79; MD, 85; MD, 100; MD, 104; MD, 106; MD, 112; MD, 120; MD, 121). Women's concerns and self-questioning often mirror the rape myths that were described in Chapter Three: *Theoretical Foundations: Feminism, Symbolic Violence, and Intersectionality*, especially myths that are categorized as *Clothing-Related Myths*, and *Women's Risky Behaviours Myths* that attribute responsibility to the victim/survivor (Willows, 2018; Edwards et al., 2011; Hashmi, 2021).

Instances of feelings of culpability and complicity revolved around the incorporation of rape myths and victim-blaming questions; statements such as "Was it to my liking?" (MD, 22; See also in MD, 12, MD, 28), self-doubt due to personal differences (MD, 73), questioning of their own attire (MD, 7), questioning of social media pictures (MD, 43), and evaluation of their behavior (MD, 53). For example, one woman expressed her feelings following an online sexual assault: "I always felt it was my fault, thinking that maybe my Facebook photos had led to this vulgar behavior, or because my pictures from trips, gatherings, and clubs gave him the idea that he could send explicit photos of women's bodies and his genitals" (MD, 43). Another survivor shared her experience: "He had broken my boundaries so easily that I started doubting myself. I was supposed to be tough, right? Fearless. Yet, I couldn't help but feel that it was somehow my fault, that I should have reacted differently" (MD, 79). A third survivor reflected on her experience over the years: "For years, I blamed myself for not resisting, for not speaking up, for pretending that nothing

happened. I thought I was to blame because I didn't react, and I had no right to object since I didn't resist. Most of all, I blamed myself and felt embarrassed that this happened to me" (MD, 85). Importantly, culpability and complicity were often expressed as self-blame; a process we will examine in the next chapter through the lens of symbolic violence.

Before leaving this theme, it is important to note that culpable/complicit was also imposed on victims/survivors by the legal system, family members, friends, co-workers, and social norms. As such, blaming, the dynamics of culpability/complicity, and silencing victims/survivors operates on multiple levels: while some victims/survivors grapple with feelings of culpability/complicity, and self-blame, others are blamed and silenced by others—a process that will be further elucidated below under the theme of *Barriers Encountered*.

To this point, we have seen the victims'/survivors' accounts of the aggressors' behaviors, the circumstances in which sexual harassment/assault occurred, and their feelings and reactions to these experiences, both during and after the incident. We now turn our focus to another recurring issue that haunts the declarations: the barriers women faced before, during, and after sexual violence incidents, which hinder their ability to report these experiences and seek help.

5.4. THEME #3: BARRIERS ENCOUNTERED

The data illustrates several formidable barriers women confronted which impeded their ability to set boundaries with perpetrators or to take action in the aftermath of the assault. The identified barriers uncovered in this research extend the discussions presented in the #MeToo Literature Review Chapter, which delved into various obstacles related to disclosing experiences and participation in the #MeToo movement, including fear of becoming targets of online abuse (Clark-Parsons, 2019; Almanssori & Stanley, 2019; Mendes et al., 2018; O'Halloran, 2022; Andreasen, 2019; Guha, 2021). However, these barriers particularly align with Kermani and Hooman's work

(2022), where they identified barriers experienced by Iranian victims/survivors in the context of #MeToo and #Rape, such as the fear of rejection, distrust in the legal system, and concerns regarding risking their family's honor (Kermani & Hooman, 2022). The barriers that we examine in this section include power dynamics, hijab, deficiencies in the legal system, notion of honor, limited knowledge, shame, concern about disclosing alcohol use, and fear of judgment. In addition, women face a lack of support and blame from those around them, disbelief in the women's testimonies, and encouragement to remain silent, which I group under the *Non-Supportive Reactions* theme.

5.4.1. Sub-Theme #1: Power Dynamics

The first and most recurrent barrier is the power imbalance between perpetrators and victims/survivors. The dynamics of power serve as a pivotal determinant, prominently evident across nearly all the declarations. The description of the nature of the (often hierarchical) relationships (perpetrators frequently held positions of authority such as teachers, supervisors, or therapists) underscores this power imbalance (e.g., MD, 5; MD, 7; MD, 9; MD, 10; MD, 11; MD, 13; MD, 16; MD, 21 MD, 38; MD, 40; MD, 44; MD, 49; MD, 55; MD, 57; MD, 85; MD, 86; MD, 90; MD, 92; MD, 111). For instance, one declaration vividly illustrates the potency wielded by influential figures within the theater and cinema realm, and how this authority can perpetuate abuse and misconduct. The victim/survivor shared:

> During a gathering hosted by an actress, two aggressors harassed both her and me, even insisting on staying overnight. The actress and I went to her bedroom and locked the door. We spent almost the entire night there, both awake and worried. It was one of the worst nights of my life. We didn't dare to kick out the two individuals who held considerable power in the theater. I was powerless at that time, just a nobody. However, the woman who

> was famous in the theater and had a certain position couldn't muster the strength to drive them out. She knew that any confrontation could mean the end of her career and involvement in the theater scene. (MD, 85)

Similarly, another notable narrative highlighted how an individual's power within the workplace can impose silence:

> One day, my [workplace] supervisor expressed an interest in having a romantic relationship with me. Although I asserted that I had no interest in such a relationship, he attempted to normalize the situation. He even stated that his spouse was aware of his relationships with other women. Throughout the remaining period of working with him, he exploited every opportunity to make suggestive comments, often jokingly. For instance, he commented on how I never went on a trip with him or had a drink together. I spent those days mostly blaming myself, not considering that he had no right to bring up such matters, regardless of his position as my superior or mentor. Slowly, I withdrew from group interactions at work. His stature within the field of work left me feeling helpless, making it challenging to address the situation and defend my boundaries. (MD, 7)

This recurring theme underscores how imbalanced power dynamics severely hinder women's ability to speak out, perpetuating an environment where aggressors can exploit their authority and maintain a veil of silence. This power dynamics barrier is consistent with the findings from previous studies, which have highlighted the broader issue of gender relations and the role of power as a significant obstacle. For instance, it resonates with Clark-Parson's (2019) findings, as discussed in Chapter Two: *Literature Review: What the Scholarship Says about #MeToo*, which emphasizes how victims/survivors may encounter distinct challenges depending on the specific contexts and power dynamics at play.

5.4.2. Sub-Theme #2: Hijab

In the two years of #MeToo narratives examined for this thesis, only one victim/survivor mentioned an incident related to the role of hijab in their testimony (MD, 37). Specifically, they wrote:

> I was introduced by a university professor to work as an editor for a scientific journal in a government organization. My supervisor consistently made inappropriate physical contact whenever he approached me. Due to his outwardly religious appearance and the age difference between us, I initially viewed him as a father, attributing his actions to no harm intent. However, these casual touches gradually increased, and on the last day, he shamelessly touched my body. [later, she continued] My attempts to seek help yielded no results, and the government entity I turned to for help had no assistance. As the sole individual who dared to go there without a confirmed veil, my voice was ignored because he was an elderly and devout man who always showed his ablution and prayer. (MD, 37)

This sub-theme links to the government's coercive attempts to regulate women's attire, a topic discussed in detail in Chapter One: *Iranian Sociopolitical Landscape: Women's Rights and Challenges*, where we described how women are subjected to significant control in public spaces at the hands of morality police (Aghtaie, 2011). This control that we observed can exacerbate women's challenges, particularly when they seek assistance after experiencing sexual assault.

However, the limited acknowledgment of hijab as a barrier by only one victim/survivor underscores a broader issue. Within the Iranian context, the criminalization of not wearing hijab and the prevalent narrative suggesting that 'not wearing hijab could potentially stimulate men's sexuality' likely deterred many women from recognizing hijab as a barrier in their experiences. The fear of receiving victim-blaming responses or having their actions questioned due to societal

perceptions further suppressed open discussions about the role of hijab in incidents of sexual violence.

5.4.3. Sub-Theme #3: The Legal System

Another significant barrier highlighted by women is the absence of support within the legal framework (MD, 49; MD, 79; MD, 108). As extensively discussed in the Context Chapter, the Iranian *Civil Code* and *Penal Code* have legitimized many forms of gender discrimination within marriage and the lack of support for survivors of sexual assault. We observed how challenging it is for victims/survivors to prove rape within the legal system due to the stringent requirements, including the need for eyewitnesses, confession, or medical evidence (Article 199, *Iranian Penal Code*; Article 200, *Iranian Penal Code*).

In the #MeToo declarations, an anonymous woman recognized this issue: "I hired a lawyer, but my complaint ended with the court telling the man that he should apologize to me. That was all. Because there were no physical injuries left on my body, the court did not impose any further punishment on him" (MD, 11). Here, we see how the Iranian burden of proof requirement plays out and how the barrier is particularly salient when there is no physical evidence of harassment or assault (Kar, 2000).

5.4.4. Sub-Theme #4: Honor

The experience shared by one victim/survivor regarding her sexual assault at the hands of an acquaintance reveals a complex interplay between cultural values, family reputation, and survivors' reluctance to speak out (MD, 16). She refrained from revealing the assaulter's identity due to concerns about her family's honor. She wrote: "His behavior in the family was as if nothing had happened. I pretended nothing occurred as well, fearing that my revealing could spark a

conflict in the family. I knew that upholding the family's honor and credibility rested solely on my silence" (MD, 16).

As mentioned in Chapter One: *Iranian Sociopolitical Landscape: Women's Rights and Challenges*, the safeguarding of the family's honor falls to women and that their virginity can be an important element in preserving this honor. In the above testimony, we see that honor served as a significant cultural barrier that often takes priority over victims'/survivors' pursuit of justice.

5.4.5. Sub-Theme #5: Limited Knowledge

A fifth sub-theme that emerged is the lack of adequate knowledge about sexual harassment/assault. As a unique finding that goes beyond the existing literature, women acknowledged this deficiency as a barrier to setting personal boundaries and preventing unwanted sexual activities by aggressors (MD, 13; MD, 38; MD, 58; MD, 85). Declaration 38 vividly reflected this realization:

> I fled and didn't return. Why didn't I scream? Why didn't I protect my dignity? Why didn't I file a complaint later? Why didn't I even message him cursing him and instead remain silent? I have many reasons, and the main reason is that I didn't know; I really didn't know at that moment, with full awareness of what sexual harassment is and how to react... what reaction should I show. I was in shock, only seeing myself in that situation and had no help or support. (MD, 38)

Furthermore, in some cases, this lack of knowledge opened up space for manipulation. While manipulation as a media tactic to discredit victims/survivors was discussed in Chapter Two: *Literature Review: What the Scholarship Says about #MeToo*—for example, by framing the #MeToo movement as a "witch-hunt" (Nuraddin, 2018, p. 55; Hannem & Schneider, 2022; Eilermann, 2018)—it takes on a different flavour as a barrier, potentially adding a unique insight to this thesis. Several women expressed that their attempts to establish boundaries or leave sexually

harassing situations were unsuccessful due to manipulative tactics (MD, 22; MD, 29; MD, 44; MD, 57; MD, 81). For example, one woman mentioned that long-term manipulative behaviors led her to have a sense of psychological instability (MD, 106). Another shared how she felt compelled to acquiesce to her aggressor because of her limited knowledge about relationship manipulation (MD, 44). In real terms, according to victims/survivors, these strategies of manipulation prolonged their silence prior to the emergence of #MeToo.

5.4.7. Sub-Theme #7: Shame

The emotion of shame, though not explicitly articulated as a barrier, is a notable factor hindering women from speaking up, often leading to their silence and reluctance to report incidents (MD, 85; MD, 89). For example, in Declaration 85, a survivor of workplace sexual assault shared her internal sentiment: "I didn't know what to do. Should I tell someone or not? I didn't want to leave my job and hadn't learned how to navigate such situations! I found it easier to blame myself, and strangely enough, shame engulfed me too! Despite being the victim of assault, a sense of shame pervaded me! I did not say anything to anyone. After a few days, I decided to return to work and behave as if nothing had occurred" (MD, 85).

5.4.8. Sub-Theme #8: Consuming Alcohol

Alcohol consumption was identified as a factor that facilitated assaults by aggressors taking advantage of women's unconsciousness (e.g., MD, 3; MD, 56; MD, 106). However, in the declarations, the women did not explicitly attribute their lack of reporting or pursuing legal action to alcohol consumption. In fact, within these #MeToo declarations, the non-reporting of assaults was presented as a common and almost inevitable response; as such, alcohol consumption was not recognized as a distinct barrier. This absence of explicit recognition of alcohol's role is in line with the criminalization of drinking alcohol under Islamic law, as clarified in Chapter One: *Iranian*

Sociopolitical Landscape: Women's Rights and Challenges (Article 179, *Iranian Penal Code*). Indeed, the fact that women did not explicitly mention alcohol as a barrier could imply the acceptance of this law among Iranian women.

5.4.9. Sub-Theme #9: Fear of Judgment

The theme "Fear of Judgment" revolves around the emotional barriers that hindered survivors from openly discussing their experiences of harassment and abuse (e.g., MD, 10; MD, 16; MD, 22; MD, 52; MD, 74; MD, 86). These barriers corroborating the findings in the literature review affirm that the dread of societal judgment deters victims and survivors from coming disclosing their experiences of violence (Mendes et al., 2018; Clark-Parsons, 2019; Glos, 2019). For example, one victim/survivor, who had endured traumatic experiences, articulated: "I finally extricated myself from that humiliating relationship, but the fear of sharing what happened to me, the apprehension of being judged by those around me, the dread of accusations, and the fear of retaliation kept an open wound within me for years, shrouded in silence" (MD, 22).

5.4.10. Sub-Theme #10: Non-Supportive Reactions

Over and over again victims/survivors of assault recounted encountering unsupportive responses from family, friends, and colleagues when they disclosed their experiences (MD, 7; MD, 55; MD, 56; MD, 63; MD, 92; MD, 112). Notably, as another unique finding that challenges the #MeToo literature, victims/survivors not only lacked the backing and belief of those around them, but they were also discouraged from sharing their experiences with others and advised to remain silent (MD, 15; MD, 16; MD, 24; MD, 27; MD, 28; MD, 92; MD, 97; MD, 117). For instance, one survivor mentioned that despite her attempts to open up about her experience, her colleagues and acquaintances found it hard to believe, as they perceived the perpetrator as a rational and composed individual (MD, 97). In another case, a survivor noted that when she disclosed her experience to

her aunt, she was told to keep it a secret (MD, 16). In another instance, a victim/survivor was warned by her colleagues not to expose the harasser's actions due to his influence and power and was cautioned about the severe consequences that may result if she revealed the truth (MD, 117).

5.5 THEME #4: SISTERHOOD: EMPOWERMENT THROUGH SHARED EXPERIENCES

The final theme we are looking at is, unlike those that preceded it, rather positive. This research brought into focus the theme of sisterhood, highlighting how women's collective support and sharing of experiences and their participation in the #MeToo movement has had positive impacts for them. The theme of sisterhood was articulated through three sub-themes: *Mutual encouragement among participants, The desire to protect others, and A newfound sense of empowerment and hope.*

1. *Mutual encouragement among participants*: The profound impact of the #MeToo movement on women and its role in fostering solidarity against sexual violence is well-documented in the extant literature (Glos, 2019; Mendes et al., 2018; Mendes & Ringrose, 2019; Trott, 2021; Phipps, 2019; Huh, 2019; Kunst et al., 2018). This influence was clearly reflected in the declarations of Iranian women, who were inspired by the global #MeToo movement to share their own experiences (MD, 13; MD, 27; MD, 93; MD, 97). A survivor reflecting on the influence of #MeToo stated: "Given the ongoing impact of the #MeToo movement and its mission to empower and protect women in professional settings, I find it crucial to share my own story" (MD, 93). Moreover, witnessing other women's narratives within the #MeToo movement acted as a further impetuous for victims'/survivors' decision to speak out. Many women wrote about being supported and inspired by other women's courage, and how this propelled them to share their own experiences (MD, 39; MD, 44;

MD, 83; MD, 86; MD, 114; MD, 120). For example, Declaration 44 stated: "Sharing my story was tough, I endured a lot of mental anguish. But it was crucial to support the voices of previous survivors. The first narrator's courage was significant. I know there are many like us, and I am sure of that" (MD, 44).

2. *The desire to protect others*: Women's motivation extended beyond the relief of sharing their personal experiences—many aimed to shield potential victims from similar sexual harassment/assault (MD, 28; MD, 41; MD, 57; MD, 59; MD, 62; MD, 78; MD, 83; MD, 91; MD, 96; MD, 116). One participant explained:

> I am writing this so that others will be aware of the violence and danger behind this seemingly decent face. I am writing this because I am no longer a lonely girl and I strive to prevent its repetition, not just for me, but for others in my circle and future generations entering the workplace. (MD, 57)

Another woman said: "I don't want others to endure the pain I went through" (MD, 91). This is also exemplified by Declaration 97, which asserted: "When I saw the name of this person in the #MeToo movement, memories flooded back. I realized it was time to amplify my voice, hoping it would end the silence around this person." The inclination to protect others through the naming of aggressors and participation in #MeToo reveals novel insights and findings that have not yet been presented in existing literature.

3. A newfound sense of empowerment and hope: It is important to appreciate that women expressed a sense of empowerment and renewed hope through sharing their stories and the collective efforts of #MeToo (MD, 2; MD, 13; MD, 15; MD, 16; MD, 61; MD, 93; MD, 95; MD, 120). One victim/survivor articulated this transformative potential powerfully when she wrote: "Tonight, when I am writing my narrative, I feel that I am the same

> enthusiastic and hardworking girl who once aimed to change the world. Now I feel empowered to write what happened. I now have hope" (MD, 2).

Of course, this empowerment through sharing and fostering a supportive community is consistent with what we saw in the literature review, and in particular, the work of Glos (2019). Glos argued that #MeToo reduced the feelings of powerlessness among many #MeToo participants. In the data presented in this thesis, we observe a similar sense of hope and strength among Iranian victims/survivors, suggesting that #MeToo potential is universal.

Concluding Comments

In this chapter, we examined the narratives and experiences shared by Iranian women in #MeToo declarations. In the process, we reflected on prevalent themes and sub-themes that shed light on the multifaceted dynamics surrounding sexual harassment and assault within Iranian society. These themes pave the way for the examination of the data through the lenses of symbolic violence and feminist theory (intersectionality) in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX

Discussion of Findings: Interpretation of #MeToo Declarations

After extracting the most recurring victims'/survivors' representations of their traumatic experiences, this chapter employs feminist theory and mobilizes the concept of symbolic violence to analyze these research findings. I start the analysis by using the concept of symbolic violence, which underscores the unequal power dynamics (domination and subordination) wherein certain forms of violence become ingrained as habitus among the subordinated group, often going misrecognized and accepted as natural and legitimate (Bourdieu, 1991). Throughout, I am guided by an intersectional feminist sensibility to illuminate the complex nature of gender relations as depicted in women's declarations within the #MeToo movement. To address the core research question—how Iranian victims/survivors represent their declarations in the context of the #MeToo #من-هم movement—I delve into the ways in which Iranian women interpret their encounters with sexual harassment and assault. This entails examining their explanations of personal reactions, the barriers they faced, and their portrayals of aggressors.

This chapter is organized into four sections, each shedding light on a unique facet of this obscured violence: *Symbolic Violence and the Acceptance of Men's Entitlement to Women's Bodies*

in Intimate Relationships, *Women's Struggle for Respectability and Virginity: Self-Regulation and Gendered Authority*, *Perpetuation of Rape Myths: Women's Internalized Self-Blame and Shame*, and *Exploring Intersectionality: Recognizing the Marginalized Voices of the #MeToo Movement in Iran*.

6.1. Symbolic Violence and the Acceptance of Men's Entitlement to Women's Bodies in Intimate Relationships

One of the key elements speaking to symbolic violence in women's declarations is the acceptance of men's right to sex and, relatedly, their entitlement to access to women's bodies. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory (2000) regarding how, in specific contextual fields, the habitus of the dominant group is privileged and affords them authority over the subordinate, we can discern striking illustrations of this phenomenon with two distinct yet interlocking stems: the first lies in the gendered norm rooted in biological myths, and the second is embedded within the Iranian legal system, particularly in the context of marriage contracts.

As previously discussed in the theory chapter, the biological rape myth postulates that men possess an uncontrollable desire for sex due to their physiological makeup (Hashmi, 2021). Moreover, in Iran, this biological myth is the foundation for "Tamkin[33]," wherein the men's habitus is characterized by unfettered access to their spouses. In short, institutional structures not only shape but also legitimize men's sense of entitlement over women's bodies.

[33] It is important to recognize that Tamkin is not the sole legal rule that bestows privilege upon men over women within marriage contracts and relationships; this dominance of men's authority is pervasive throughout these contracts. As we previously elucidated, women are deprived of the right to obtain divorce, and even in cases involving child custody, their husband's consent is required if the child is over seven years old. This illustrates the nature of legal provisions that uphold male authority and control within these relationships.

It became a form of symbolic violence, however, when women, in their declarations, did not problematize men's presumed entitlement to their bodies. The ways women respond to men's persistent demands for sex, often stemming from a sense of uncertainty about how to reject an embodied duty, underscores a form of compliance that has become internalized within the habitus of intimate relationships.

Women's compliance is, in many respects, a manifestation of their taken-for-granted cultural knowledge, which was molded by societal norms, legal frameworks, and interpretations of religious texts (symbolic power) and caused them to experience coercion as natural and credible manifestations of masculine biology. Furthermore, in the preceding chapter, we saw how victims/survivors often express compassion for their partners' sexual needs, linking men's coercive actions to their intense desire and longing for them (women). In this subjugation of their agency and consent, women frequently cooperated without complaint, fulfilling their partner's desires as a means to relieve them, further reinforcing the symbolic violence embedded within these narratives.[34] In short, I am arguing that Iranian women's cultural knowledge of intimate relationships has been significantly influenced by both the aforementioned biological rape myth, and religious and legal interpretations. These interpretations have been crafted and perpetuated by individuals who wield symbolic power, such as clerics and judges, and have subsequently been entrenched and further reinforced in legal and social spheres.

[34] In addition, the lack of marital rape recognition within the #MeToo Declarations suggests that married women's cultural capital has been shaped without the inclusion of their agency and consent as crucial aspects of intimate relationships.

6.2. Women's Struggle for Respectability and Virginity: Self-Regulation and Gendered Authority

The above point in relation to intimate relationships demonstrated one of the ways symbolic power circulates through the legal and religious realms (fields). Considering the dialectical influence of these fields on social norms and habitus, it is unsurprising that we observed a similar pattern of domination and subordination outside intimate relationships. As we saw in the previous finding chapter, the concept of virginity was frequently deployed by aggressors in these unequal relationships as a means to manipulate, humiliate, and discredit women's feelings of discomfort. When women expressed their concerns about their virginity to these aggressors, they often experienced humiliation. However, this humiliation transformed into a form of symbolic violence when women's acceptance of male authority went further and extended to self-regulation. Women's efforts to explicitly state that they were virgins at the time of the incidents reveal that maintaining virginity had been embraced as a privileged habitus by single women. Of course, it is important to remember that the virginity discourse is a mechanism to control women by curtailing sexual agency and autonomy.

In line with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence (1999), women's efforts to hold up their virginity as a valuable feature could inadvertently reinforce embedded stratifications and further stigmatize women who are sexually active. Some victims/survivors emphatically asserted that they were not sexually active before the assault, with one even likening the aggressor's judgment of her sexual history to a "second rape" (MD, 2). This underscores that, even after experiencing rape, virginity remains a subject of value and a signifier of purity for women. These assertions of sexual purity validate the dualistic notion that "bad girls" engage in premarital or extramarital sex, while these women aimed to differentiate themselves and align with the gendered

discourse of "virtuous girls" who supposedly maintain sexual purity for their future husbands. In doing so, these victims/survivors unintentionally fell into the trap of what is known as "respectability politics," which suggests that sexually active women deserve violence (Maynard, 2017, p. 140).

6.3. Perpetuation of Rape Myths: Women's Internalized Self-Blame and Shame

Reviewing of #MeToo movement narratives revealed that myths related to attire, culpability, complicity, and the belief that women can always resist sexual assault led to a profound sense of shame and guilt among victims. Some women described feeling responsible because they were unable to fight back against aggressors or were so shocked and frozen that they were incapable of action. Others engaged in self-criticism, scrutinizing their clothing choices, communication styles, and even their pictures on social media, suggesting a belief that their own actions had somehow caused or contributed to the sexual harassment or assault they experienced. In short, they often accepted blame for the assault, questioned their own behavior, and/or remained silent out of a sense of shame that is rooted in rape myths.

It is here that it is fruitful to incorporate feminism into our analysis to help us identify the embedded gendered ideology and hegemonic practices at play. As discussed in Chapter Three: *Theoretical Foundations: Feminism, Symbolic Violence, and Intersectionality*, feminism has drawn our attention to the ways rape myths serve to diminish the responsibility of male perpetrators while simultaneously discrediting and scrutinizing the behavior, presentation of self, and attire of victims/survivors (Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018; Kavcic, 2020). These myths are deeply embedded in the social, religious, and juridical habitus of Iranian women and thus may be reproduced through women's actions following instances of sexual harassment and assault.

In this context, various factors, including mandatory hijab, the criminalization of alcohol consumption, and the concept of honor, collectively contribute to the normalization of rape myths and the perpetuation of a rape culture that remains largely unacknowledged. For instance, in Iran, the enforcement of mandatory hijab and the criminalization of alcohol have been justified as measures aimed at keeping women safe from sexual harassment/assault. Of course, in real terms, this puts the burden of preventing rape and sexual assault squarely on women's shoulders, responsibilizing them to adhere to these laws and societal norms.

In post-revolution Iran, a narrative has become pervasive in various elements of Iranian society, including religious institutions, the media, educational systems, and even within families. This narrative suggests that not wearing hijab could potentially stimulate men's sexuality and that hijab symbolizes modesty and virtue for Iranian women. Consequently, these rules (hijab, alcohol) have been deeply ingrained as protective measures against the risk of sexual assault. Indeed, the myth that provocatively dressed women are consenting to sexual relations has taken on a unique form in Iran, and many women in Iran have internalized a particular form of hijab ('proper' hijab) and behavioral norms as a means of preventing sexual harassment and assault (Willows, 2018, p. 19). So, this unique context makes it more challenging for women in Iran to recognize the normalization of this responsibility compared to other countries, constituting a form of symbolic violence.

A Bourdieusian analysis adds a critical perspective by considering how the reproduction of these norms and the legitimacy of laws rely on the unspoken and unthought sense of habitus (Bourdieu, 1987). This habitus functions in various fields as a form of embodied capital, shaping perceptions and actions. Consequently, we observed that among the 124 declarations, only one acknowledged the hijab as an unfair barrier, which led to her accusation not being believed by

institutional authorities. Interestingly, none of the declarations mentioned the role of alcohol, which suggests that the criminalization of these laws has been accepted and internalized by women in Iran.

Finally, two key points deserve emphasis: First, during the #MeToo movement in Iran, many women were exposed to and influenced by the global hashtag's efforts to challenge rape culture. As previously mentioned, a significant number of these women openly acknowledged that they had once accepted rape myths or blamed themselves. Therefore, in analyzing their expressions of self-regulation or self-blame, I did not intend to suggest that all these women continue to perpetuate symbolic violence. While some of them did indeed reproduce these ideas in their declarations, it is equally important to note that many others recognized that they had once accepted these ideas but that they no longer do so.

Second, it is essential to underscore that the perpetuation of symbolic violence within the women's declarations did not result from deliberate planning or consistent practices. Rather, it emerged unintentionally within their declarations, some of which even had contradictory goals (Bourdieu, 1991). Many women acknowledged their lack of knowledge about sexual violence, which provides insight into why certain rape myths are evident in their narratives or why the women blamed themselves and reproduced stigmatic assumptions. In the following section, I will delve into how adopting an intersectional lens can further enrich our understanding of women's knowledge and positionality in this context.

6.4. Exploring Intersectionality: Recognizing the Marginalized Voices of the #MeToo Movement in Iran

In our analysis, we have discerned that the prevailing power dynamics, legal system, and societal concerns related to family honor, virginity, and judgment, did not create a safe and inclusive space

for all victims and survivors to share their experiences, even when doing so anonymously under the #MeToo hashtag. In Iran, as in many other countries, social, economic, cultural, and linguistic capital are not equally accessible to all individuals. Women, individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, those not adhering to the official religion (Shia), those identifying as homosexual or transgender, and individuals with disabilities face heightened barriers and discrimination.[35]

Within the realm of gender-based violence, marginalized women's experiences are often compounded by intersections with other aspects of their identities. They may encounter discrimination and violence stemming not only from their gender but also from their class, sexuality, ethnicity, religious beliefs, disabilities, and political views. Consequently, marginalized women face substantial barriers to speaking out and participating in movements like #MeToo. This is reflected in the notable lack of representation of narratives from rural women, working-class women, disabled women, or women from minority ethnic and minority religions backgrounds.[36] This highlights the necessity of adopting an intersectional perspective to comprehend the underlying reasons for this lack of participation.

This thesis contends that the prevailing notion of the 'ideal victim' in Iran is often associated with specific characteristics, including being Muslim (Shia), middle-class, Farsi-speaking, heterosexual, cis gender, and able-bodied. This group represents the most privileged segment of women in Iran, akin to the privileges enjoyed by white middle-class women in the West. Notably, many Iranian women who have participated in the #MeToo movement embody these characteristics, fitting the mold of the 'ideal victim.' Indeed, within the Iranian #MeToo

[35] It is important to acknowledge that, in Iran, there exists a privileged group that enjoys numerous advantages—cisgender heterosexual Muslim Shia men who align with governmental discourses.
[36] The minority ethnic groups in Iran include Arabs, Azeris, Kurds, and Baluchis. Additionally, there are minority religions recognized in Iran, including Jews, Bahá'ís, Christians, and Zoroastrians.

movement, the typical participant seems to mirror the image of a middle-class, educated, Farsi-speaking woman.

However, it is vital to note that the information available in women's declarations provides only limited insights into their educational backgrounds, socio-economic status, digital literacy, and proficiency in Farsi (the official language). While a significant number of participants appear to belong to the middle-class and do not hail from marginalized ethnic groups, details regarding their religious beliefs, sexuality, and political stances remain undisclosed. Were this additional information available, adopting an intersectional lens would enable a deeper exploration of how various identities intersect and manifest.

CONCLUSION

In this concluding chapter, I will reflect on the objectives of this thesis, summarize the key findings, and discuss their contributions to the literature. I will also address the primary research question and speak to limitations of the project. Finally, I will outline potential avenues for future research.

- ***Goals***

The overarching aim of this thesis was to scrutinize the declarations of victims/survivors who participated in the #MeToo movement and delve into the intricacies of how they interpret and navigate their experiences. Specifically, the study sought to shed light on the underlying layers of socially constructed meanings within their narratives.

- ***Findings***

This thesis explored how Iranian victims/survivors of sexual harassment/assault utilize the #MeToo movement to acknowledge and recount their experiences. This investigation gains significance when considering the potential impact of women's choices in representing their experiences, aggressors, and themselves in the interests of shaping new perspectives, altering sexist and misogynistic behaviors, or inadvertently reinforcing them.

The findings of this thesis shed light on several crucial aspects. First, women participating in the #MeToo movement drew attention to the ways aggressors, all of whom were cisgender heterosexual men, endevour to regulate women's sexuality. And how these men utilized their perceived legal rights, often rooted in biology myths, as well as mobilized feminist discourse and virginity narratives. Second, this study revealed the presence of attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate rape myths, including beliefs such as *"real" rapes are committed by real aggressor*, *men's sexuality is uncontrollable*, "*real" rapes are violent and result in visible injuries*, and *victims*

are culpable/complicit. Furthermore, women's declarations detailed the barriers they faced both before and after participating in the #MeToo movement. These barriers reflected power dynamics, the influence of hijab, limitations within the legal system, concerns related to honor, limited knowledge about sexual harassment/assault, feelings of shame, fear of judgment, and non-supportive reactions from their surroundings.

Despite the structural and relational obstacles they encountered, women exhibited remarkable resilience and determination in their efforts to speak out, which emerged as a prominent theme in the form of sisterhood. Many women drew inspiration and courage from the #MeToo movement and other victims/survivors. They not only felt a moral obligation to potential victims/survivors but also spoke of experiencing a newfound sense of hope through the act of sharing their own experiences. This theme highlights the potential for collective support and empowerment to drive transformative change through movements like #MeToo.

Taken together, this research has addressed the primary research question. The findings have indicated that victims/survivors who participated in the Iranian #MeToo movement during its initial two years, often grappled with self-blame and a sense of responsibility for the assault.

- ***Contributions***

This thesis has advanced our understanding of the concept of symbolic violence and its manifestations within the #MeToo movement. It has provided important insights into the dynamics of power, identity, and representation within the declarations of victims/survivors. By using Bordieuan theory to analyze the symbolic violence in these declarations, this research has made a contribution to the feminist academic discussion in terms of how power imbalances, particularly symbolic power, were unequally distributed within gendered relationships, often going unrecognized or misrecognized as natural by the subordinates (victims/survivors). For instance,

many victims/survivors exhibited self-regulation behaviors, aligning with Bourdieu's concept of how individuals can unconsciously cooperate in their own oppression.

Additionally, this investigation has contributed to a deeper understanding of gender-based violence's complexities, particularly within the context of the #MeToo movement in non-Western countries. By introducing Iranian #MeToo narratives, this research expands the scope of academic discourse and contributes to the existing literature on #MeToo content and representation.

- ***Limitations and Future Research***

This study has certain limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, due to the anonymity the victims/survivors maintained in their declarations, I faced constraints in undertaking an intersectional analysis. While I could make guesses about some aspects such as women's age, socioeconomic status, level of knowledge, and, in rare cases, their city of residence, having access to more direct and comprehensive information would have allowed for a more in-depth examination of how intersecting identities influence both the participation in #Metoo and in the representation of their experiences. Moreover, absent this information, it is impossible to suggest that the findings and conclusions are generalizable.

Second, a notable limitation is the deletion of numerous declarations and tweets during the initial months of the movement, including the original tweet by an aggressor that sparked the #MeToo movement in Iran. It is likely that many of these deletions occurred due to threats and a lack of support, particularly because these individuals often lacked concrete evidence. This made it challenging for me to track the chronological sequence and provide precise details regarding the inception of #MeToo in Iran. While I have a general timeframe, the lack of specific data presents limitations.

The third noteworthy limitation is the reliance on declarations collected by, and shared on, feminist organizations as the primary data source. This decision was driven by the challenges in verifying the accuracy and reliability of other tweets (given the extensive efforts of Iran's government to manipulate and disseminate false information on social media). However, it is important to acknowledge the potential selection bias.

Taking these three limitations into account, there are many different avenues that future research projects could further expand our comprehension of the Iranian #Metoo movement. One of the primary directions for investigations into sexual harassment/assault in Iran and its intersection with #MeToo would be to explore the experiences of marginalized victims/survivors, including individuals from the LGBTQIA2S+ community. These individuals face unique obstacles that have not yet been thoroughly examined within this context. Future research should adopt an intersectional approach to explore these barriers and their roles in shaping and portraying the experiences of marginalized women and LGBTQIA2S+ individuals in Iran.

Furthermore, while my thesis touched upon various themes, particularly barriers, there is room for more in-depth exploration of how these aspects function in relation to Iran's legal system. For instance, future research could delve into the dynamics between victims/survivors who filed complaints about their experiences and the subsequent legal procedures they encountered. Another worthwhile area for future inquiry could revolve around the role of social media activism in non-Western settings, especially in authoritarian countries like Iran with stringent censorship. Investigating the effectiveness of online movements such as #MeToo within such contexts could yield valuable insights into the impact of transnational feminist activism in challenging sexual violence issues.

While there is much work to do, there is also much forward momentum. As such, it is fitting to finish this thesis with Tarana Burke, the American activist who introduced using the phrase "MeToo." Tarana Burke's (2022) words vividly capture her aspirations for change, aspirations I share:

> And so what we have to do is shift the norm so that young people looking at me like, Oh my God. What are you talking about? Date rape? Who does that? You know, like, Oh my god, Consent. Of course, we ask for consent. You don't touch people without asking. Like, it's just like a no brainer. So, we just, we wanna shift culture in a way that young people are thinking about it so differently that the next generation after that are just like, this is not even done.

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Appendix (A)

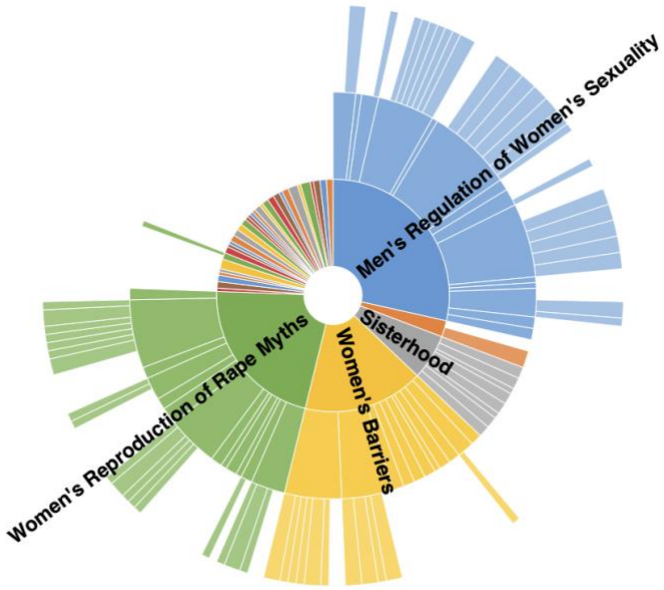

Table 1	
Theme	**Frequency**
Men's Regulation of Women's Sexuality	**444**
Women's Reproduction of Rape Myths	**232**
Women's Barriers	**116**
Sisterhood	**65**

Iranian #MeToo declarations themes and frequency