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Female Hysteria, Invisibilized Labour, and the *Kafala* System

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A few decades ago, the medical industry considered “hysteria” a clinical disorder that affected women,¹ and was known by symptoms such as emotional outbursts, fluctuating sexual behaviour, changing appetite, and tantrums. Due to the hegemonic patriarchal structures in health care institutions and scientific knowledge production broadly, this condition was widely believed to be curable by marriage, pregnancy, and by sending women to asylums for treatment. Localised feminist knowledges and practices contributed to debunking many of these ill-founded myths, which made their way into the scientific and psychiatric community as authoritative knowledge on the nature of female behaviour across different contexts. In the dominant medical discourse, “hysterical” female behaviour was understood as an inherent female expression of irrationality that supposedly revealed women’s weakness vis-à-vis men, as well as their inability to self-govern their emotions.

“Hysteria,” whether named as such and treated as a formally diagnosable condition or not, is repackaged today in different forms. It remains a deeply-rooted patriarchal belief that pervades institutions and shapes perceptions and treatment of women in Arabic-speaking countries and beyond. This is explicitly visible through monolithic and flattened representations of women in Arabic film and media for example. Common tropes in *mosalsalat*, or soap operas, include the damsel in distress who is obsessively preoccupied by marriage or the woman tormented by thoughts of her cheating husband. More generally, women are often portrayed as “hysterical,” irrational, and overdramatic characters, while men, in contrast, are level-headed and able to tame their emotions in the face of adversity. *Mosalsalat* are in fact notorious for their slap scenes; men are often represented as disciplining, paternalistic figures that have the right to hold women in check by slapping and beating them when necessary.² Not only do such representations on the silver screen reflect broader perceptions of female “hysteria” that still permeate society through patriarchal ideology, they are also a testament to the ways in which female suffering is frequently trivialised, and how “taming” it is considered a man’s right.

In normative culture, women’s behaviour and bodily expressions are often depoliticised, side-lined, and overlooked as valid forms of resistance against unjust treatment. Yet, the body is a site for political struggle. Its various forms of dissent and rebellion (perceived as “hysterical”) need to be heard and used to challenge normative ideas of what constitutes a resistance act. This reconceptualization of dissent and resistance is important in challenging the patriarchal power structures that enforce the subordination of women and girls. We need a more holistic understanding of how psychosomatic conditions and mental health issues are closely linked and frequently triggered by systematic and gendered violence and injustice. Infantilised portrayals of women, which are seen as pitiful expression of female suffering, must be challenged. “Hysterical” behaviour needs to be rethought and acknowledged for the power it holds as a *proactive* display of rage and agency against structures of oppression that individualize social ills, often leaving women with no other choice than to take out their collective rage onto their own bodies. Feminising non-normative forms of protest (including non-verbal acts such as crying, shouting, screaming), as well as labelling them as markers of female “hysteria” or “insanity” are some of the ways in which every day

¹ <https://bit.ly/2FkFx4m>

² <https://bit.ly/2FiivLE>

patriarchal violence is whitewashed. When such violence takes place in the confined spaces of the home, and turns domestic life into a hostile environment, what outlets of expression are then tolerated, effective, and available to women who do not want to comply by imposed gendered norms, or who refuse subordination? Those who profit from women's exploitation are neither interested, nor in a position to fully understand gendered injustices they have not experienced and vehemently judge the different acts of defiance that are carried out in response to them. Yet reality, more often than not, plays out precisely as such, and circumstances in which "insane" female behaviour occurs are actively decontextualized by patriarchal culture and dismissed for being "futile."

What kind of education can women and girls resort to, then, to tie the personal to the political? How can they understand and collectively overcome the ways in which their coping mechanisms and resistance to oppression are perpetually pathologised and depoliticised? Contributions to feminist scholarship continue to sharpen social analyses that have omitted gender dynamics and possibilities for women's liberation. For example, they have pushed for the use of vulnerability as a tool for resistance, and developed feminist praxis to carve out much needed spaces (both digitally and physically) for improving intersectional feminist organizing (Butler et al., 2016). However, a gap exists between theory and practice; the resources and tools for educating and collectively organising are not made accessible to most women and girls, who still find themselves heavily reliant on knowledge gained through their own experiences of sexual harassment, sexism, misogyny, and the various encounters with the patriarchal system that ultimately shape their consciousness of the struggle against gender injustice. Education systems do not consider feminist knowledge legitimate enough for inclusion in the curriculum. For those who have the luxury of receiving post-secondary education, it is often by stumbling upon optional modules (offered by departments who must continuously fight for their existence) that feminist consciousness is given space to intentionally develop. Ultimately, women's struggle and resistance are atomised.

Part of the alienation that is promoted through capitalist patriarchy and its subordination of women is the act of disconnecting the driving factors of oppression from the symptoms of oppression. Outcries, tantrums, and other emotional responses that women display at times are not seen as resulting from, or as acts of resistance against, gender injustices. Instead, women and girls are socialized through patriarchal narratives that rationalise such behaviour as "biological" – "that time of the month," and other justifications that imply hormonal imbalances and essentialist reasons are to blame. This severing of ties between structural cause and effect is partially sustained through the lack of access to educational resources and social support mechanisms needed to not only understand, label, and challenge oppressive structures that take advantage of them, but to recognise that there is also violence perpetuated in the silencing of their volumes of pain, rage, and frustration.

Female "Hysteria" and Gendered Labour

The connection between mental health and patriarchy is explicitly visible through the gender-assigned roles that have long shaped the division of labour. In particular, social constructs that are institutionalised under

patriarchy have differentiated between the types of labour that women and men are *able* and *entitled* to do. The binary model dictates that men are the breadwinners whose labour force participation is a must, while women are homemakers and caregivers. The social norms and institutions that are built around these expected divisions of labour not only relegate women to the domestic sphere, but also set uneven conditions for their participation in labour markets, which are ultimately designed for and shaped by men. In this context, women are marginalised at the outset, and do not work under equal or equally dignifying conditions.

More so, under globalisation and neoliberal free market capitalism, feminism has been co-opted without its fundamental principles of gender justice (Shahvisi, 2015). Instead, it is reduced to a trend that pushes for more female representation and gender diversity across institutions (Ibid.). In this context, feminist thought is moulded into a type of “corporate feminism” that is ultimately concerned with boosting companies’ branding and sales through “femvertising.” These surface-level efforts are largely confined to “female empowerment” campaigns and initiatives. While they perhaps help privileged women advance their careers, they do very little to promote gender justice for the majority of women around the world.

In high-income countries, “care” (understood here as domestic and affective labour) is outsourced to poor women from lower-income countries – who are mostly pushed by precarious economic conditions³ to migrate, perform domestic work, and send remittances back home to help support their families (Shahvisi, 2015). Across the world, comparable regimes of migrant monitoring profit from the exploitation of poor women and girls. It is important to link their localised struggles to a global system that perpetuates cycles of female dependency and undervalues their labour. Poverty is also multidimensional and intersectional – it cuts across vertical (income and class-based) inequalities, but also horizontal ones (arising from discrimination based on marginalized social identities and constructs), such as race, gender, and ethnicity (Kabeer, 2015). The most acute forms of disadvantages are a combination of these different factors, which explains why some women are more likely than others to experience “chronic poverty” or remain in the poverty trap (Ibid.).

The Kafala System

There is an increased reliance on migrant domestic workers (MDWs) to do care work, particularly amongst those who can afford to have domestic and child rearing responsibilities outsourced to someone else. When it comes to women’s mental health under patriarchy, MDWs are some of the hardest hit. The *kafala* sponsorship system is an overt example of this and seems to still be considered a taboo topic. In many countries of the Middle East (including, but not limited to Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi

³ Arianne Shahvisi explains the ways in which oppression against women is globalized through debt relief programmes implemented in low-income countries that disproportionately affect poor women and contribute to the feminization of labour (in particular sectors such as the garment industry but also transnationally, with the rise of migrant domestic work for instance).

Arabia), female migrants are recruited as domestic workers by legal sponsorship of their *kafil*, or employer. During their stay, they are heavily monitored under the economic and legal dependency of the *kafil*. This happens through a contractual agreement that can only be terminated through the approval of the *kafil* him/herself, who is also given significant leverage in determining their terms of employment and leisure. In this paternalistic relationship, little to no accountability mechanisms exist to ensure that the employee is effectively protected from exploitation and abuse. Upon their arrival and throughout their stay, the domestic worker's freedom of mobility is heavily compromised. MDWs have explained the ways in which their movement is closely monitored at the airport for example. They are put in "isolation" rooms as they wait to be picked up by their employer at the start of their work period (Gemma et al., 2016). Sometimes, they wait for days due to the *kafil*'s neglect, with little to no food and water to sustain them (Ibid.). Overnight conditions in the airport also put MDWs at risk, with cases of sexual assault reported in the absence of responsible, overnight security (Ibid.).

Many employers are emboldened to take advantage of their sponsored employee with impunity (e.g. withholding wages or underpayment), and the lack of framework for worker protection under the *kafala* puts domestic workers at high risk of physical abuse and sexual assault. MDWs in Beirut, who have described their lived experiences in trusted spaces, expose the alarming normalisation and frequency of sexual violence and racism they encounter – whether through exclusionary architecture that denies them the same access to public spaces as other inhabitants of the city, or through everyday racism and racialized sexual harassment and assault (Gemma et al., 2016). Grassroots organizations document the web of abuses that MDWs are subjected to,⁴ as well as the high proportions of suicide⁵ that happen as a result of this exploitative treatment.

However, the dominant narrative remains one that individualises the *kafala* problem, suggesting that while most sponsors treat their employees respectfully, there are always "bad apples" (Pande, 2013). As a result, on the question of migrant domestic labour specifically, analyses largely focus on band-aid solutions, including ways to deal with an abusive employer, or the kind of counselling the latter may require (Ibid.). Rarely do ideas of structural interventions, aimed at changing the patriarchal framework itself, surface or materialize in the mainstream.

The number of "bad apples" does not matter when the fundamental issue remains that the *kafala* is a system of labour regulation that *enables* the widespread exploitation of (mainly female) migrant workers in the first place, and as such increases their vulnerability (Mansour-Ille & Hendow, 2018). It privatizes responsibility towards domestic workers, who become the liability of their employer rather than the state (Pande, 2013). This institutional arrangement deters female migrant workers from turning to third parties to address concerns they may have or to resolve labour disputes. Instead, the system is set up such that the only option granted to employees is to negotiate with their abusive employer, to whom they are legally bound (Ibid.).

⁴ <https://www.migrant-rights.org/>

⁵ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/08/26/lebanon-migrant-domestic-workers-dying-every-week>

Without the adequate socio-legal mechanisms to hold employers accountable for their actions, nor any effective third party that can help mediate problems between the employer and employee, MDWs are pushed to consider options that are illegal in the eyes of the state, such as escaping from the family they work for. Because fleeing the employer is a common course of action, it has been argued that the *kafala* system produces a vulnerable class of MDWs who reside informally in the host state, struggling to find ways to secure their livelihood (Pande, 2013).

However, we must question the use of legality as a benchmark for options available to MDWs – for what legitimacy can the rule of law claim in bringing justice, when it upholds labour systems that inflict gendered violence, keep women and girls trapped in cycles of exploitative labour, and criminalise them when they try to escape? When the law is not just, it is harmful and incapable of providing substantive solutions to those it discriminates against. A system that institutionalises oppressive labour structures cannot be depended upon to rehabilitate those subjected to the violence of its own making. The extent to which labour laws serve and protect migrant women must be fundamentally questioned given the gendered exploitation they are complicit in upholding. Traditionally, labour law jurisdiction has been territorially confined to the nation-state in order to protect its citizens, but even then, domestic and unpaid care work have been neglected – reflecting women’s marginal position in labour institutions in general (Fudge, 2014). Through the expansion of global care chains, this process is taken further and MDWs are largely left outside the scope of conventional regimes of regulations, with no recourse to *effective* legal instruments for protection (Ibid.).

MDWs continue to fight back against these institutionalized forms of oppression through individual and collective forms of resistance. Although they face restrictions on mobility in Lebanon for instance, they organise through the means at their disposal – in the form of “balcony talks” (when they are unable to leave the house), informal gatherings at churches, or by working within/alongside grassroots organizations (Mansour-Ille & Hendow, 2018). In their struggle against labour and gender injustice, MDWs have contributed to the development of a trade union movement and continue to take part in various grassroots initiatives, such as Mesewat⁶ –a solidarity network founded by Rahel Zegeye in 2018, and committed to advocating for the rights of MDWs in Lebanon. To navigate hostile and racist environments, MDWs demonstrate their agency through embodied practices of “hysteria” as well. Through various personal accounts, some have shared the ways in which they respond to sexual harassment on public transportation and in spaces within Beirut:

I once threw a bag of fish at an old taxi driver (...) the old man groped my ass. I made a scene in the bus. I slapped him and shouted at the driver to let him off right then (...) I had a glass bottle and I used it to injure the guy. I explained to my boss what he did to me but the young man kept lying, insisting I had attacked him with the bottle for no reason. (Gemma et al., 2016)

⁶ <http://mesewat.com/>

Documented accounts not only exemplify MDWs agency within the patriarchal system that subjugates them, but also highlight the ways in which their grievances and concerns are refuted, and at times criminalized.

The *kafala* is not a unique system, as patriarchy does not stop at borders. Efforts must be directed to challenge labour structures that hierarchize female worth, normalise their exploitation, and put their mental health up for bargain. As racialized women of colour, community organizers, movement builders, and allies, we must ask ourselves: how far have we come in tying the personal to the political, in exposing the relationship between women's psychological wellbeing and the patriarchal system that subordinates them? While feminist groups, grassroots organisations, and social mobilization efforts challenge the status quo and push for progressive change, it seems that the connections between female labour, mental health, and resistance to patriarchy have not garnered the attention they deserve in the mainstream of Arabic-speaking countries.

Work needs to be done to de-stigmatise discussions about the "(in)sanity" of particular female behaviour in the domestic sphere in general – such as outbursts, cries, and tantrums; all are reactions that have been historically used to falsely attest to the "irrationality" and emotive nature of female behaviour. Rather, such actions must be understood from a lens that does not dismiss forms of bodily resistance against the exploitative conditions of a patriarchal system in which female subordination is promoted, their labour undervalued, and their rage frequently mocked, and dismissed. As feminists, we must analyse existing strategies of community organizing in order to highlight the connections between gendered labour and mental health. Only then can we reframe the role of non-normative acts of resistance and rebellion that have been historically neglected, and that continue to be glossed over by patriarchal ideology.

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