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Gendered violence and epistemic injustice in Iran: women's civic aspirations for justice

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Gendered Violence and Epistemic Injustice in Iran: Women's Civic Aspirations for Justice

Abstract

This article explores Iranian women's perspectives on eliminating violence against women (VAW), with a particular focus on how they challenge the structural and epistemic injustices that underpin such violence. The study draws on a qualitative, purposive voluntary sample via an anonymous Instagram survey, chosen for its accessibility and reach among women and girls in Iran. A total of 453 respondents aged 16–59 answered the open-ended question, “Write your views and suggestions regarding violence against women and how to eliminate it,” and their responses were thematically analysed. While this method enabled wide participation, it also introduced likely sampling bias towards internet users—particularly younger, urban, and tech-savvy participants.

Participants identified a wide range of violence, including emotional, physical, sexual, coercive control, and street harassment. However, the most prominent themes that emerged were the need for raising awareness, among both women and men, about what constitutes violence, and the demand for comprehensive legal reforms to address and prevent VAW. Many responses indicated a desire to reshape cultural and religious norms that have historically contributed to women's marginalisation. The study draws on the concept of *epistemic injustice*, particularly Miranda Fricker's distinction between testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. The participants' narratives highlighted how women's experiences of violence are frequently dismissed, minimised, or rendered unintelligible in dominant public discourses, examples of both testimonial injustice (being disbelieved or discredited) and hermeneutical injustice (lacking the interpretive resources to make sense of their experiences). By articulating their understandings of violence and proposing solutions, these women actively resisted such injustice and asserted themselves as credible knowers.

Overall, respondents acknowledged the intersecting structural, cultural and religious norms that perpetuate VAW in Iran. Yet their responses were not solely diagnostic; they were also future orientated and hopeful. They strongly believed that education, awareness-raising and legal reforms are catalysts for change. Women emphasised the right to be heard and valued as credible sources on their views on VAW and perceived themselves as active participants in overcoming barriers that have historically silenced them.

Keywords:

Violence against women, epistemic injustice, Iran, awareness raising.

Introduction

Violence against women (VAW) is a profoundly complex issue, particularly when researched across diverse contexts (Skinner et al, 2005). Each country's cultural, legal, and social landscapes present a set of nuances of VAW that vary, making it a challenge to develop

universally acceptable insights and solutions. Different contexts present unique dimensions that influence not only the types and manifestations of VAW, but also, the effectiveness of prevention and intervention strategies. This complexity necessitates a nuanced approach in research to ensure that the specificities of each context are taken into account (Author).

One of the most comprehensive definitions of VAW to date was provided by the 1993 United Nations World Conference on Human Rights, which defined it as: *'any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life'*. However, while widely recognised, this definition has certain limitations. It was formulated in a specific socio-political context and may not encompass some of the contemporary dynamics of VAW, which since 1993 have evolved significantly. For example, digital technology has led to new forms of violence, particularly online abuse, disproportionately affecting young women (Author; Wood et al, 2015). Moreover, the definition does not fully capture subtler forms of abuse like coercive control and its cumulative nature (Stark, 2007), which is a pattern of controlling behaviours, including isolation, intimidation, and surveillance, used to dominate and restrict a person's freedom and autonomy. Nor does the definition address spiritual abuse (Author; Mulvihill et al., 2019), where religious authority or sacred texts are misused to dominate and undermine women's agency. The omission of these forms of violence from dominant definitions reflects a form of *epistemic injustice*, particularly *hermeneutical injustice*, in which women's lived experiences are not fully recognised within prevailing conceptual frameworks. Yet it is precisely in response to these silences and erasures that many women formulate their own strategies to resist and counter violence by naming overlooked harms, demanding recognition, and advocating for legal, cultural, and educational change.

Despite these gaps, the 1993 definition remains valuable for its ability to link different forms of VAW and highlight their role in sustaining structural gender inequalities (Hester, 2004). While valuable, these definitional limitations, particularly their failure to encompass more subtle, cumulative, or culturally specific harms, highlight the urgent need for context-sensitive research that foregrounds women's lived experiences and interpretive authority. This article contributes to that effort by examining how Iranian women themselves understand and resist violence,

particularly within a context shaped by legal, religious, and social constraints. Drawing on Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice, we explore how women reclaim credibility and interpretive power in a system that routinely dismisses or devalues their perspectives. We propose that women's responses reflect a civic aspiration for justice, a forward-looking form of epistemic resistance articulated through calls for legal reform, public education, and cultural transformation.

The article proceeds as follows: first, we outline the historical, legal, and ideological backdrop that structures gender relations in Iran, with particular attention to laws and discourses that regulate women's autonomy. We then review the literature on VAW in Iran and situate the present study within that body of work. The theoretical framing of epistemic injustice is presented, followed by the methodological approach. The findings are drawn from the participants' written responses and analysed to show how women articulate violence, identify root causes, and propose strategies for change.

Setting the scene

In 1979, an uprising against the Royal family started to take shape in Iran which resulted in the succession of the Iranian Islamic Revolution. From this point onwards, gender became a focal point of the Iranian State. The dominant narrative, driven by those in power across different platforms, such as schools, radio and TV stations, situated the oppression of women within Western 'cultural imperialism'. It was stated that women in pre-revolutionary Iran had been the victims of Pahlavi's era by being exposed to 'alien ideas, images and practices' that undermined women's dignity (Moghadam, 2003). Therefore, it was seen as the Islamic State's foremost duty to restore Iranian women to their rightful place and to shield them from external influences. To achieve this a redefinition of gender relations was viewed a necessity to align with the religious mandates set by the State. This entailed the introduction of numerous laws and policies that were gender discriminatory in nature. In many contexts, including Iran, men were (and often still are) portrayed as inherently vulnerable to female temptation, with women's very presence seen as destabilising male rationality and self-control. This biologically rooted narrative, that men are unable to restrain their sexual impulses, has long justified cultural and legal efforts to regulate women's appearance and behaviour.

In Iran, this rationale has been central to the state's mandatory veiling policy, which frames hijab not only as a religious duty but as a necessary tool for protecting public morality and shielding men from women's supposedly provocative presence (Author, 2017). Women's bodies have thus been constructed as sources of danger that must be covered and controlled in the interest of maintaining societal order. This logic also underpins broader cultural norms that link female modesty and sexual restraint to family and communal honour. As a result, women who are perceived to transgress these norms, whether through dress, behaviour, or perceived sexual impropriety, face heightened risk of blame, stigmatisation, and even violence, including so-called honour killings (Kewley, 2000). Within this framework, women have been positioned as the bearers of familial and societal honour, and this status leaves them particularly vulnerable in cases of sexual assault, where the focus often shifts to their appearance or conduct, rather than the perpetrator's actions.

The gender model promoted by the State has been portrayed as Islamic and therefore divine and non-negotiable (Mojab, 1995). This has meant that, over the last 45 years, anyone who has overtly criticised the State's laws and policies has been punished, excluded, and/or labelled as an agent of the West. Yet, this authoritarian approach by the State has not prevented the Iranian people from voice their dissatisfaction with its discriminatory practices and policies. For example, ongoing tensions between youth and the morality police reflect this persistent resistance. Importantly, the nation's resistance to the State's gender discriminatory policies have not been limited to certain segments of the society and this has been evident in the recent 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement (Author, 2023; Asadi Zeidabadi, 2023). This is not to suggest that women enjoyed full freedom under the Pahlavi regime; however, the establishment of the Islamic Republic marked a significant rollback of the limited liberties they had gained. Many of the restrictions imposed by the post-revolutionary State were rooted in long-standing legal norms and cultural practices (Moghadam, 2003).

Violence against women in Iran: existing research

A growing body of research has explored various forms of VAW in Iran, particularly domestic violence, psychological abuse, and institutional responses. Several studies have focused on experiences of violence within the private sphere (Rezaee & Mardani-Hamoooleh, 2020; Tizro, 2012; Mir-Hosseini, 2000; Kar, 2000;). Prevalence studies such as Dehkordi and Heydari's

(2024) systematic review and meta-analysis estimate that 59% of Iranian women experience domestic violence, with psychological abuse (50%) more common than physical (25%) or sexual (20%) violence. A similar pattern is confirmed in Jafari and Parvin's (2022) review, which found psychological abuse to be the most common form, followed by physical and sexual abuse. Ahmadi Gohari et al. (2023) further highlight that the visibility of such violence is strikingly low, with nearly two-thirds of cases in Southeast Iran going unreported due to stigma, shame, or lack of institutional trust. These findings align with earlier research pointing to underreporting often linked to so-called honour-related issues and the normalisation of abuse (Tizro, 2012; Shams et al., 2020).

Several studies have also explored the socio-demographic risk factors for domestic violence. For instance, Jahromi et al. (2015) identified low levels of education, among both women and their husbands, as a major contributing factor, alongside age and duration of marriage. Across the literature, cultural norms such as *gheirat* (a patriarchal sense of honour) and legal shortcomings are frequently cited as factors that sustain or excuse male violence.

Legal and sociological analyses have deepened our understanding of how institutional frameworks contribute to the persistence of VAW. Rahbari (2023), for example, uses the case of Mona Heydari's murder to explore how the Iranian legal system and broader State discourse enables violence through what she calls 'legal himpathy.' Drawing on Manne's (2017) theory, Rahbari demonstrates how laws that permit child marriage or reduce penalties for honour-related murders, structurally legitimise male violence. Her work reveals how *gheirat* operates not just as a cultural value but as a legal mechanism that normalises femicide and devalues women's lives in official discourse. This complements earlier critiques by Mojab (2001) and others who argue that Iranian legal reform is severely constrained by the state's patriarchal ideology.

While a few studies have addressed the taboo subjects of rape and sexual violence (Auther; Naghavi et al. 2019) and others have examined gender-related issues more broadly, there remains a notable lack of recent research that centres women's own voices. A large scale study conducted in 2004 by the Iranian Ministry of Internal Affairs in Iran, surveyed over 12,000 women and 2,000 men across 28 counties. The result was compiled in 32 volumes, each volume containing

about 200 pages by a team of university-based researchers. However, despite the large scale of the research and potential importance of this study, its findings have not been made publicly available.. In fact, Shahindokht Molaverdi, then the Vice President for Women and Family Affairs, announced at the "World Without Violence Against Women" conference that 32 volumes of the findings from the national study on forms of domestic violence against women have gone missing' (Molaverdi, 2014). This reflects a broader issue: research on VAW in Iran is frequently hampered by institutional barriers and political sensitivities and a lack of transparency. Given these constraints, , some researchers have started used social media to gather sensitive data on hard-to-reach groups (Hashemi, et al, 2024). This is a promising shift in methodology for contexts where traditional research tools are restricted or surveilled. In general, it could be said that despite the scale of VAW, significant gaps remain the literature. Much of the existing research focuses on prevalence rates, risk factors, or legal critique, while few studies have asked Iranian women themselves how they understand violence and what strategies they believe are needed to address it. This article seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do Iranian women conceptualise violence against women in their everyday lives?
2. What strategies do they propose for its elimination?
3. How do their responses reflect and resist structural and epistemic injustice?

Building on this, to fully understand the context in which women's narratives emerge, it is important to consider the legal and ideological structures that shape their lives. In Iran, the Islamisation of marriage and the codification of gendered expectations through state law have profoundly impacted women's autonomy, rights, and access to justice. The following section explores how these institutional arrangements contribute to what can be described as state-sanctioned restrictions on liberty. Understanding the legal and ideological foundations of gender relations in Iran, particularly those inscribed in marriage and family law, is essential for grasping how women's agency and interpretive power are regulated. These structural mechanisms of control create the conditions for what we later conceptualise as epistemic injustice.

Islamisation of marriage and state-sanctioned liberty crime

The laws and policies in Iran, some of which have roots in the pre-revolution era (Moghadam, 1999) have contributed to the prevalence of gender inequality. Some of these laws and policies within both private and public spheres can be viewed as forms of VAW, resulting in

‘state-sanctioned liberty crime’ (Author). Stark (2007) argues that men often use coercive control to exert power over women and weaken their autonomy through ‘micro regulation’ of their daily lives. He called this ‘liberty crime’ in which an individual’s personhood is taken away from her by ‘usurping her subjectivity’. Stark believed that the concepts of coercive control and liberty crime are only applicable to the Western context where there is formal equality. However, Author (2016) suggests that liberty crime can also be applicable to non-western contexts where the laws are explicitly gender discriminatory. Additionally, liberty crime is not limited to the private sphere; it can also be enacted by the State itself. As you will see below, in the discussion surrounding the Islamisation of marriage and the various Civil Codes in Iran, women's sexuality is predominantly viewed as the concern of those regarded as their 'guardians'—namely, male family members, the State, and the *ummah* (nation). This perception often results in the erosion of women's autonomy, as their personal rights and freedoms are deemed as subordinate to the interests and control exerted by these entities.

As outlined below, some family laws and policies in Iran are inherently gender discriminatory, yet they are often justified through various means. Tabatabai, a prominent religious scholar, states that women are inferior to men in maturity and virtue, and this perception leads to a divergence in the rights and obligations assigned to men and women (Kadivar, 2013). This view aligns with other influential scholars such as Motahari (1979) who believed in proportional equality. The foundation of the legal system in Iran and the resultant policies concerning what constitutes VAW are based on the principle of proportional equality. This principle aims to delineate rights and responsibilities for men and women within the framework of Islamic law, leading to a gendered interpretation of legal norms. According to Tabatabai *equality is a natural prerequisite of social rights and duties, but equality that stems from social justice does not require that all social ranks be distributed among all members of society. The prerequisite of social justice that can be interpreted as equality is for all to have their proper rights* (Kadivar 2013: 209).

The Islamisation of marriage which is based on the proportional equality has had a profound effect on women’s lives in Iran. This began with the annulment of 1967 Family Protection Law which had previously granted women certain legal rights. Its repeal lowered the legal age of marriage to 9 for girls and 15 for boys, removed women’s rights to initiate divorce

and reinstated men's unilateral right to divorce and to enter into polygamous marriages (Paidar, 1995). It needs to be noted that the entire laws and policies within the Iranian context are heteronormative and construct femininity and masculinity in a traditional binary manner which perpetuate gender inequality. For example, it reinforces gender stereotypes and gender roles from household duties to employment and leadership. The traditional construction of 'womanhood' within the family sphere manifests itself in the public sphere with granting men the role of authority and supremacy. Mir-Hosseini (2000) and Tizro (2012) have critically explored the dynamics of Islamic marriage and how the two genders are positioned within the family. They argue that the framework of Islamic marriage commodifies women's sexuality and treats it as an asset that is tradable. So as soon as the marriage sermon is recited, men are bestowed the role of guardianship. This means men are responsible for providing maintenance, *nafaghe*, irrespective of the wife's earnings; in return, the wife must be obedient. As Mir-Hosseini puts it: "*This right is absolute: it can neither be waived by agreement nor delegated*" (Mir-Hosseini, 2000: 46). However, it has to be mentioned that Shari'a laws are not understood the same way across Muslim societies and the Koranic texts have been interpreted differently in different locations and by different religious scholars. The comparison between Shari'a based family laws in Morocco and Iran is a clear example of the diversity between the two (Mir-Hosseini, 2000).

Within the view of Muslim scholars, women's sexuality exists only in the marital setting, and they should be obedient to their husbands. This is reflected in one of the article's of the Civil Codes of Iran: 'A woman is legally obliged to be obedient [tamkin] to her husband (Civil Code, Article 1108)'. 'There are two sides to tamkin: tamkin aam and tamkin khas. Tamkin aam means that the wife should not leave the house without his permission. Tamkin khas is fulfilling the husband's sexual desire as long as they do not clash with Sharia law' (Auther). The husband can refuse to provide maintenance, *nafaghe*, if the wife is not obedient (Shahidian, 2002, Tizro, 2012; Mir-Hosseini, 2000). So, you could say that within this context, marriage is perceived as a contract which accommodates sexual relations between two opposite genders, which depicts the centrality of sexual gratification within such a contract. However, it is a unidirectional system in which men are perceived as the key actors who should have access to sex anytime they desire, and women are passive recipients who ought to be available at all times, if needed. Women have to renounce their sexuality, have full self-control over any sexual instinct when not needed and be available and pleasing at their husband's will. According to Shahidian (2002) women are

expected to possess two paradoxical sexual identities: one that is open and pleasing, and another that is practiced outside of marriage and is modest and almost non-existent.

Najmabadi (1998) has described the term ‘tamkin khaas’ in marriage as a way of suppressing women and encouraging the notion of superiority of men over women. Kar (2000) believes that articles such as 1108 of the Civil Code where women lose their rights to maintenance for refusing to have sex with husbands, deny women any rights in their marital bed and result in VAW. There are other gender-discriminatory practices and laws that curtail women’s autonomy and liberty at the institutional level. For example, various empirical research studies have highlighted that in the Iranian courts, if a woman wants to leave the marriage, in many cases, she has to leave the children with their father or paternal relatives (Mir-Hosseini, 2000; Tizro, 2012). This will deter women from leaving a violent relationship. Other examples include Article 1043 of the Civil Code which states, ‘the legality of their marriage is also contingent on their father’s or the paternal grandfather’s approval’ or ‘the husband is designated the head of the household by law -Article 1105, or ‘a man may prohibit his wife from employment-Article 1117. Author () argues that these articles can be conceptualised as a form of ‘state-sanctioned liberty crime’.

It needs to be noted that the concept of liberty has been critiqued by scholars such as Mahmood (2005). She argues that in different cultural and religious contexts, such as the women's mosque movement in Egypt, liberty can take forms that are not necessarily about resisting norms. Mahmood (2005) believes that notions of liberty and autonomy can be expressed through religious devotion and the pursuit of piety. Although Mahmood’s critique of liberty within f secular frameworks broadens our understanding of how autonomy can be shaped in line with Islamic principles, it does not fully address how this perspective may sometimes obscure the ways in which power and oppression in a theocratic state are used to curtail women’s rights and limit their choices. It is believed that using religion as a tool adds another level of difficulty for women to challenge state sanctioned liberty crime. Some scholars (Mir Hosseini, 2000; Eshkevari, 2013) have argued that it is an injustice to portray the origins of these laws and policies as rooted in religion and that *‘the time has come for a fundamental intellectual shake-up in this system and for building a new legal structure within the qur’anic*

and tawhidic value system, with an eye, of course, to contemporary understandings of justice and notions of rights (Eshkevari, 2013, in Mir hosseini, et al: 2019).

Comparative perspectives from other Muslim-majority countries reinforce the view that legal reform is possible, even within religious frameworks. For example, Morocco's 2004 reform of the Moudawana (family code) raised the legal marriage age for women and granted mothers greater mother greater custody (Fakhria & Marpuah, 2022); and 2011 constitutional reform and the 2018 law on violence against women further enshrined gender equality (Xu, 2024). Or the ratification of CEDAW and withdrawing its reservation in Tunisia (Hitman, 2018). While these reforms have been shaped by both domestic feminist activism and international pressures, efforts to reconcile traditional norms with contemporary legal standards continue to face obstacles in implementation and public acceptance (Xu, 2024, Kashina, 2021). In Malaysia, too, Muslim feminists have mobilised around gender-sensitive interpretations of Sharia to challenge discriminatory practices, though reform has been uneven. For example, Initiatives like Musawah have emerged from feminist Muslim scholars and activists seeking to reconcile Islamic principles with gender equality, resisting both patriarchal interpretations of Sharia and secular feminist approaches that dismiss religion as a barrier (Mir-Hosseini, 2017). Again, despite Malaysia having legal frameworks, entrenched patriarchal norms, economic inequalities, and limited access to support continue to hinder women's ability to seek protection, highlighting a gap between legal reform and lived reality (Amiruddin et al, 2024).

Therefore, you could say that the notions of justice and rights are contextual, subjective and hence open to interpretation and the subjective understanding of justice influences the forms and impact of '*matrix of domination*' (Hill Collins, 2000: 231) that could potentially silence women's voices. The following section uses Fricker's (2007) notion of epistemic injustice as our conceptual framework (both testimonial and hermeneutical) concerning VAW to assist us in making sense of women's narratives in this study.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework: Epistemic injustice

At the time of designing the survey, the aim was to create space for women to share their own views on violence and potential solutions in their own words, without the influence of predefined categories or culturally loaded terms. The single open-ended question was intentionally crafted to elicit participants' interpretations and priorities in a format that preserved

anonymity and encouraged open responses. The simplicity of this approach was a deliberate strategy to maximise accessibility and inclusion in a society where researching VAW in its broader terms, which include the private and public sphere might be perceived as politically sensitive.

While some studies on violence against women in Iran have drawn on Islamic feminist frameworks (e.g. Mir-Hosseini, 2006); or theories of cultural and structural violence (Author, 2016) or adopted a Foucauldian framework (Tizro, 2013), offering valuable insights into the intersections of gender, religion, and state power, the nature of the data in this study aligned most clearly with concerns around the marginalisation of women's knowledge and the ways in which their voices are silenced, dismissed, or excluded from dominant narratives. Therefore, during the analysis stage, it became clear that the concept of epistemic injustice offered a conceptual foundation that aligned well with the data. The framework was thus applied retrospectively to deepen our analysis of whose knowledge is recognised, how it is received, and what structural conditions shape its legitimacy.

Fricker (2007: 1) states that there are two forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. When a speaker experiences a credibility deficit due to an identity prejudice (for example, based on gender or/and age), in a way that they are harmed in their capacity as a knower, they suffer testimonial injustice. Research has shown that testimonial injustice can significantly hinder a woman's ability to seek help or obtain justice, when experiencing violence as her voice is silenced due to gender biases (Mesina, 2022). In contexts where women's testimonies about their experiences of violence are dismissed, not only can VAW be normalised but also it provides impunity for the perpetrators (Rekers, 2022). The #MeToo Movement is a prime example in which women overcame epistemic injustice by asserting their knowledge and experiences and challenging the social structures that had historically silenced them (Jackson, 2018)

Hermeneutical injustice is a situation where 'someone has a significant area of their social experience obscured from understanding owing to prejudicial flaws in shared resources for social interpretation' (Fricker, 2007: 1). As McKinnon (2016) argues, we rely on social structures and others for the acquisition, creation, and sharing of knowledge and people will suffer from hermeneutical injustice when they cannot make sense of their own lived experiences due to a

lack of hermeneutical resources. Fricker (2007) uses the example of sexual harassment to illustrate how hermeneutical injustice works. She explains that before the consciousness-raising efforts of second-wave feminism in the 1960s, women did not have a commonly recognised term to explain the various forms of inappropriate behaviours they often experienced in the workplace. However, the introduction of the term ‘sexual harassment’ was an important step in addressing this injustice, as it helped women not only to understand their experiences but also provided them with the language to communicate them effectively which led to several legal changes

Within the Iranian context, we believe, women’s voices and experiences of violence are marginalised, devalued and dismissed. For example, women’s testimonies are not given equal weight in the legal system or women might be encouraged to stay silent in order not to tarnish the family’s honour (testimonial injustice). Additionally, women’s voices are underrepresented in the creation of laws policies and religious interpretations. This creates hermeneutical injustice where women are not given the platform, However, the findings also reveal that women are not only subjected to epistemic injustice, they are actively resisting it. Their calls for education, public awareness, legal reform, and cultural change reflect a form of epistemic agency. Based on these insights, we propose the concept of civic aspiration for justice.

Civic aspiration for justice refers to the expressed desire by individuals, particularly those in marginalised or authoritarian contexts, to challenge the institutional, legal, and cultural systems that sustain injustice. While not necessarily collective or organised, these aspirations reflect a civic-minded impulse to reshape public understandings of harm, responsibility, and justice. In this study, women articulate such aspirations by naming violence, questioning entrenched norms, such as *aberoo* (reputation) and *namoos* (honour) and demanding structural change.

This concept builds on Fricker’s foundational theory of epistemic injustice but shifts the focus from individual credibility or interpretive access to broader, future-oriented demands for recognition and reform. It highlights how epistemic resistance can take the form of civic aspiration.

Methodology

The data were collected between February 2020 and January 2022 via a cross-sectional anonymous survey from a sample of 453 Iranian women aged 16–59 who all resided in Iran at the time of the survey. The aim of the survey was to characterise the nature of both domestic (including intimate partner violence and other family members) and non-domestic (e.g., stranger) violence experienced by women in Iran.

The survey questions for this study were informed by one of the author's (FB) vast experience working with victims/survivors facing different forms of gender violence in Iran. The survey included both closed- and open-ended questions to collect quantitative and qualitative data. This article is based on the participants' qualitative responses to an open-ended question: 'write your views and suggestions regarding violence against women and how to eliminate it'. Interestingly, with no other prompts, the participants wrote very little concerning their attitudes to VAW and instead focused on the ways to eliminate it. It is not possible to determine the exact reasons, and we can only assume that it may be due to various factors, such as an assumption of shared understanding, leading participants to focus on forward-looking solutions, or because discussing the topic in a narrative form is emotionally taxing, making it more empowering for them to write about practical and effective approaches. This is an area that future research could potentially shed light on. However, it is important to highlight from the quantitative part of the survey that all participants reported experiencing at least one form of violence, with 75% indicating domestic violence perpetrated by male family members. Therefore, their perspectives on how to eliminate violence are likely shaped by their personal experiences

The participants were recruited via an online survey created on a free online survey builder platform called Porsline. This approach allowed for wide participation, including from women who may not typically engage with formal research due to stigma, fear, or limited access to institutional spaces. However, one of the trade-offs of this method was the lack of opportunity for follow-up or clarification. To protect participants' anonymity and ensure their safety, particularly in a politically sensitive context, we did not collect identifying information or initiate direct communication. As a result, when responses included ambiguous terms or concepts, we were unable to seek clarification. In these cases, we exercised caution in interpretation and refrained from imposing assumptions about participants' intended meanings. Where terms were unclear, we acknowledged this explicitly in the analysis to maintain transparency. This limitation

is a clear challenge in open online qualitative surveys, but it was outweighed, in our view, by the ethical and practical benefits of allowing women to respond freely, anonymously, and on their own terms. Also, it needs to be noted that there is a possibility that some women may not have taken part of may have responded in some instances differently due to the view that the online space could be surveilled by the state. Research in other contexts has shown that covert digital surveillance by governments leads to increased self-censorship and restrictions on digital technology use (Yilmaz, et al, 2024). However, other research has shown that social media in Iran has become a space where women, LGBTQ+ individuals, dissidents, artists, and even state actors engage in shaping both political discourse and everyday life, constructing alternative identities and narratives (Faris & Rahimi, 2016).

The survey was in Farsi and a link to a web page framed as “a survey on women’s health and exposure to violence” was distributed via Instagram. According to official State statistics, Instagram is the most widely used social media platform in Iran, with over 24 million users (Turani, 2023). According to a recent UK government country information note, an ISPA poll estimated that, as of September 2024, around 56% of the Iranian population used Instagram – approximately 49.5 million users (Home Office, UK Visas and Immigration, 2025). The survey included an electronic participant information sheet and informed consent. On average, it took, 5–7 minutes for participants to fill out the questionnaire.

Participation in the survey was voluntary, the participants were not offered any financial incentives and as the survey was anonymous, no personal information of the respondents, such as their name, address, or contact details, was collected. To ensure the safety of the participants, an ‘exit quickly’ button was added to each page of the survey. So, the participants had the choice of pressing the button and exiting the survey, in case they needed to. Also, a list of support services was provided to the participants that included free helplines.

Framework analysis (Ritchie et al, 2003: 219), a ‘matrix-based method for ordering and synthesizing data’, was used to analyse the qualitative data from the open-ended responses in the survey. A thematic framework is the central component of this method. Microsoft Excel was used to facilitate the organisation and manual coding of data, enabling structured categorisation, indexing, and cross-referencing within the matrix. An inductive approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was adopted to identify the codes based on the Farsi extracts of transcripts relating to the

targeted research question. Following familiarisation and refining through raw data and cross-sectional labelling, the main themes were identified as: awareness raising and education and legal reform. These were broken down into a series of related subtopics. Each main theme was organised into its own matrix with every respondent given a row and each column assigned to a specific subtopic. We applied sample double coding, with both the first and second authors independently coding a subset of responses to support consistency and enhance reliability.

Ethical approval was obtained for both primary data collection in Iran and secondary data analysis in the UK. Data collection in Iran was approved by the independent internal ethics committee of Mehre Shams Afarid (MSA), a non-governmental organisation supporting women affected by violence. Secondary data analyses were approved by the ethics committee at City, University of London (VISION consortium; reference ETH21220–299). The study complies with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (Article 23, paragraph 3).

Limitation of the approach: Although high percentages of the Iranian population have access to Instagram, this approach can be perceived as producing a biased sample as Instagram users are not fully representative of the population due to a variety of reasons. For example, we acknowledge that Instagram users are more likely to be urban, younger, and more digitally literate, which may limit the representativeness of our sample and exclude women in rural or highly conservative settings. In addition, participation was self-selected: women who encountered the invitation and felt sufficiently safe and motivated to respond may differ from those who did not, including those facing higher levels of surveillance, device monitoring, or restricted internet access. However, the aim of a qualitative approach is not generalisability, but rather to gain an in-depth insight into a particular issue. Accordingly, our claims are framed as interpretive and context-specific, prioritising analytic insight over statistical representativeness. In this context, using an online platform is appropriate as it helps facilitate the engagement of hard-to-reach groups. Further to this, while we agree that open-ended survey responses may lack the depth and interactive nuance of in-depth interviews, this method was chosen deliberately to prioritise reach, anonymity, and ethical safety. This design choice limits opportunities for follow-up probing, clarification of ambiguous statements, and participant validation/member-checking in real time. Finally, given the anonymous, online nature of the survey, respondent characteristics cannot be independently verified. We therefore interpret responses as contextualised accounts

shaped by the conditions of online participation, rather than as verifiable population-level measures. Research on violence against women in repressive contexts often requires compromises between methodological depth and participant protection (Clark & Saleh, 2021).

Findings:

This section explores participants' responses to the open-ended survey question: "Write your views and suggestions regarding violence against women and how to eliminate it."

Although participants briefly mentioned different forms of violence, such as emotional, physical, sexual, coercive control, and street violence, their primary focus was not descriptive but solution-oriented. Rather than recounting personal experiences in detail, they concentrated on pathways to change. Three key themes were identified in the data: 1) education and awareness-raising, 2) challenges to honour-based norms, and 3) legal reform. These themes can be read as reflecting how participants resisted dominant narratives and asserted their right to be recognised as credible knowers, what we refer to as their civic aspiration for justice.

These findings can be situated within the broader structural and ideological forces discussed earlier, including the Islamisation of marriage and the concept of state-sanctioned liberty crime. By naming forms of violence, questioning entrenched cultural norms, and demanding systemic reform, participants at times demonstrated both critical insight and a desire for transformative change. Their narratives offer a powerful counterpoint to the conditions of epistemic injustice that have long constrained women's voices in the Iranian context.

Education and awareness raising:

Many participants believed that educating men was crucial to combating VAW.

Educating men is more important than educating women because it is men who commit violence and assault (95).

In my opinion, everything comes down to the mindset of the men and boys in society. As long as their way of thinking doesn't change, nothing will be achievable (245).

While these statements do not explicitly critique dominant cultural structures, they reflect a shift in how participants framed responsibility for addressing violence. Rather than placing the

burden of change solely on women, they emphasised the need for men and boys to critically reflect on their behaviours and assumptions. In doing so, participants redirected attention toward those who hold social and relational power, and whose attitudes sustain harmful norms. By calling for the transformation of male ‘mindsets’ as a prerequisite for eliminating VAW, these narratives implicitly challenge the gendered knowledge hierarchies that uphold male authority, what can be understood as patriarchal epistemologies. Some called for structural change as part of educating men acknowledging that the legal system needs to hold men accountable for VAW:

Proper legislation regarding women's rights, punishing men [who commit VAW] and reforming cultural education for men are necessary to combat (161).

Some participants challenged traditional views of male guardianship over women’s sexuality and expressed the importance of educating men on issues like coercive control, gender equality, and women’s right to autonomy. In this way, they not only identified violence but also disrupted the social hierarchies that reinforce testimonial injustice. As one participant put it :*I wish they would hold classes for our fathers and brothers on 'It's none of your business what I wear or where I go' (132).*

It must start with men; they should not see women as their property and should let go of notions of control and possessiveness. We women are human beings first, just like men. We must be equal (298).

Some participants emphasised the importance of educating women about their rights, building their self-esteem, and encouraging them to challenge societal norms that perpetuate silence around violence and to learn about what constitutes violence. In this sample, the large majority of participants did not engage in victim-blaming or place responsibility for violence on women. Instead, they emphasised on women’s rights awareness, assertiveness, and the importance of speaking out. For instance, the following statement from a participant can be read as a subtle pushback against the broader cultural and legal norms that expect women to remain compliant and self-sacrificing. In the context of Iran’s legal framework, particularly laws that institutionalise male guardianship and obedience within marriage, such calls for awareness and self-prioritisation challenge not only personal but also structural expectations. They may be seen

as a form of everyday resistance to state-sanctioned gender roles and the wider discourse that restricts women's autonomy. *'Women should believe in themselves, become aware of their rights, and prioritise themselves. Women must be assertive and should refuse to remain silent....So, the first step is awareness'* (134)

Some participants felt that the State bears a responsibility to implement a comprehensive educational curriculum that introduces children to the issues surrounding VAW from an early age. They highlighted the importance of promoting respect and dignity within relationships as essential components of this curriculum.

Many participants acknowledged the importance of having a support structure to aid victims of violence. This suggests an understanding that awareness alone is not enough, but structural conditions must change to enable epistemic agency:

...women themselves should become aware and refuse to tolerate violence provided legal and social support are in place to back their stance. It must begin with women themselves, and gradually things will improve. If women do not seek change, it will never happen (110).

Although the following participant clearly identified the need for resistance and solidarity, her reflection, *"we remain silent out of fear of being without money or shelter"*, revealed how material precarity constrains action, even when the experience is understood. This is not a case of *hermeneutical injustice* in Fricker's strict sense, as the participant demonstrated interpretive clarity about her situation. Rather, it points to a form of structural and material injustice, where women's ability to act on their knowledge is limited by economic vulnerability and the absence of state support. Her personal account, *"just like me, as my problem is not having a place to stay"*, highlights how state-sanctioned liberty crime operates not only through legal or ideological control, but also through systemic neglect, whereby the state's failure to provide basic protections (such as shelters or financial safety nets) undermines women's autonomy. And yet, by naming the problem and expressing hope for collective change, she enacts a form of epistemic agency, asserting her perspective within a context that often denies its legitimacy.

We need to stand up ourselves, not be afraid, and work together to drive change. It might take a long time, but things will get better. Often, we remain silent out of fear of being without money or shelter, just like me, as my problem is not having a place to stay (84).

While the large majority of participants did not engage in victim-blaming and called for shared societal responsibility, a small minority reflected on how some women may reinforce harmful narratives about other women, often through internalised misogyny. As one participant explained::

First, we women must look out for each other and not call one another ugly names based on our clothing or makeup choices. If some women continue to use derogatory terms for others' appearance, we can't expect better [treatment] from men. We must start with ourselves. For example, when someone is assaulted, some women might say things like 'she must have wanted it' or 'it's her own fault' or even ask 'why doesn't it happen to us? (303)

This insight reveals that testimonial injustice can also be reproduced horizontally, when women's accounts are dismissed or judged by their peers rather than by institutions or male authority figures alone. Yet, even within this critique, the participant is engaging in civic epistemic resistance and calling for change from within and advocating for a shift in how women treat and validate one another's experiences.

Women's Resistance Against Honour (namoos) Culture

Some women explicitly expressed that issues such as honour (namoos) and reputation (aberoo) should not prevent women from challenging VAW. Research has highlighted that women are sometimes pressured to stay silent in order to keep the family's honour intact. Previous studies within South Asian families in the UK have also shown that the combination of perceiving women as the backbone of a family's honour and men as women's guardians forces women to stay silent as deviation from the norm could bring shame to the entire family (Gill, 2009). The notion that women are the bearers of family dignity, combined with the legal and cultural positioning of men as women's guardians in Iran, has historically curtailed women's ability to speak out. This dynamic echoes issues raised earlier regarding the Islamisation of marriage, where the regulation of women's sexuality and autonomy is codified through

religiously framed laws. Importantly, participants in this study directly contested these honour-based expectations. Rather than internalising these norms, they called for change, both in personal attitudes and institutional frameworks. Several participants discussed the importance of media in promoting women's rights and challenging notions such as honour and reputation. They believed that challenging these concepts in media is crucial to create a more supportive environment for women to speak out.

I suggest that women should not show weakness, should stand up to men, and refuse to remain silent. The law must support women's rights, and so should the media. Public awareness should be raised, not in a way that forces women to preserve their reputations at any cost and tolerate many wrong things (105).

Women who experience violence should know that they can contact social emergency services without fear of losing their reputation and save themselves from danger (87).

Many women in the survey similar to the participant below challenged the cultural logics of namoos/ aberoo by rejecting the idea that women are men's property or inherently subordinate. Rather than internalising these honour-based norms, this participant articulates a form of epistemic resistance, calling for a shift in how gender and power are understood. In doing so, she appears to push back against the deeply rooted belief that preserving family honour requires women's silence and submission:

Fighting against male domination over women and opposing mindsets that treat women as men's namoos (230).

What is interesting is that these women themselves are not silent and the prevalence of a culture of honour has not normalised VAW for them. No participant in this sample justified any forms of VAW and some explicitly challenged patriarchal structures within the family, community and the legal framework. This can be read as demonstrating their resistance to epistemic injustice despite the fact that the societal structures and norms have constrained and limited the appropriate conceptual framework for some of their peers to fully understand and address the problem of VAW. They asserted that gender should not be the deciding factor for restricting women's rights and autonomy. For example, the following statement suggests that

adhering to the codes of honour had been internalised in the previous generations. However, they see the societal values as evolving rather than fixed notions, which opens the possibility of change. In this light, the participants' views can be seen as civic epistemic resistance: a forward-looking effort to transform dominant narratives and promote broader social change.

Society is patriarchal. My generation saw our mothers live with honour, and this became a value for them. If these perspectives change, perhaps women will begin to realise that life can be lived differently (151).

Furthermore, several participants located responsibility for awareness-raising not only with individual women, but with institutions, particularly the education system.. They believed that schools sometimes endorse violence, though specific examples were not cited. Research, however, has shown that school textbooks in Iran often promote a binary portrayal of gender roles, depicting men in public, professional, or leadership capacities while presenting women primarily in domestic roles (Amini and Birjandi, 2012; Taghi Azad, 2020).

In my opinion, equality between men and women should be taught from childhood in the curriculum, and there should be a textbook covering these issues from the beginning to the end of schooling. Addressing these topics is even more important than subjects like math and physics (454).

... Schools are the best starting point for proper education, but unfortunately, they often contribute to the promotion of violence against women (59).

The significance of the role of family and media was also highlighted by many participants. Some participants stressed that social media has had a positive influence in raising awareness about VAW across all genders suggesting this awareness may contribute to a decrease in its prevalence.

In my opinion, social media is having a very positive impact on raising awareness among people of both genders about this issue, and hopefully, in the next generation, we will see much less violence against women (423).

If we start by raising awareness within our own families, the situation will improve significantly. Raising public awareness is crucial, and I believe the media can play a very influential role in this process(125).

Statements similar to the one below illustrate a clear instance of testimonial injustice, where women's credibility is questioned by their own families, leading to silence and fear of disbelief. Yet, by naming these dynamics and demanding systemic change, women in this study not only resisted silencing, but also challenged the patriarchal epistemologies that render violence invisible or unimportant. In doing so, they moved beyond individual narratives toward civic aspiration for justice, asserting their right to reshape public understandings of harm and accountability.

The main problem lies with families. They either don't provide the necessary awareness from childhood or don't create a sense of trust that allows a child to speak up without fear. My suggestion is mandatory education for families before having children, as well as guidance on how to respond when they learn about such issues. A big problem we women face is that if we speak up, they say we're lying, and if we stay silent, they ask why we didn't speak up earlier (260).

Reforming the laws

Many participants were critical of the State for failing to address VAW through existing laws and policies. Some acknowledged that challenging VAW in a society where gender inequality is deeply rooted presents significant challenges. Nonetheless, many participants remained hopeful and believed that despite the State's disproportionate power and frequent lack of accountability, the task is not impossible.

In a patriarchal society with regressive rulers and outdated views on discrimination and gender inequality, combating violence against women is very challenging, but is not beyond reach. Women must expand their intellectual development (139)

It should be noted that the exact meaning of ‘intellectual development’ in this participant’s response is unclear. However, it is reasonable to interpret this as likely a reference to self-education, particularly in gaining knowledge about VAW.

Women in this study pointed out that the priority of the State is to preserve the hijab rather than taking steps to raise awareness about VAW. This critique also can be read as demonstrating the State’s investment in controlling women’s appearance over protecting them from harm, a dynamic that reinforces *state-sanctioned liberty crime*, where laws and policies actively restrict women’s autonomy while enabling a culture of impunity.

This should be a concern of the government. We have so many hijab-related advertising banners in the country, yet we don't have a single awareness banner regarding harassment against women (54).

The participants frequently stated that the current laws that govern the family and women’s sexuality are patriarchal and need to be changed. They stressed that these reforms need to be accompanied by a change in culture and the education system. They called for laws to be based on the pillar of humanity rather than the person’s gender. Some held the view that VAW is normalised within the legal system and the perpetrators are not held accountable for even committing murder. Such examples can be read as illustrating testimonial injustice, in which women’s experiences are minimised or dismissed by judicial and legal institutions, and perpetrators are shielded by cultural and legal narratives that diminish the seriousness of VAW.

Changing laws related to rape and marriage...(422).

Enacting modern laws based on humanity, regardless of gender (402.)

... A father kills his daughter, gets released, and the rest you can figure out yourself (15).

Many participants challenged the notion of tamkin khas and perceived it as inherently gender discriminatory. Some of the narratives reflected the fact that participants made a connection between men’s views of women as sexual objects and the broader context of VAW and justice. They also demanded a shift in attitudes that prioritise women’s sexual autonomy and dismantle the structures that perpetuate VAW. Statements such as the one below, point towards

the systematic denial of women's personhood, both through cultural narratives and institutional practices, emphasising the structural nature of epistemic injustice.

The worst violence I've seen so far has been from a judge. The laws in this country are ridiculous and completely against women, and most men's views of women are still limited to just a sexual object. New laws need to be enacted, cultural awareness needs to be raised, and those who promote law and justice should be chosen based on different criteria (35)

In my country, Iran, a woman is seen only as a tool for fulfilling sexual needs and as an unpaid servant for men. If we had proper laws that recognised women as human beings, there wouldn't be so many issues...(171).

While some participants focused on one or two aspects to eliminate VAW such as education and raising awareness among women and men or focusing solely on legal reforms, others stressed that change needs to happen at both grassroots levels and through systematic reforms. They believed that challenging patriarchal norms extends beyond legal considerations to include cultural, social, and religious contexts. As mentioned previously, rather than engaging in victim blaming in this sample, they believed it is the State's responsibility to support women to gain financial independence and recognised that despite the State's attempt to portray women as weak, men should be taught otherwise. The following extract is reflective of some participants' perspectives:

Society must move away from patriarchy and establish equality between men and women. Religious and misogynistic beliefs need to be removed from the culture and laws of the country, and a culture of equality should be adopted instead. Victim blaming must be eliminated. Women should be empowered to achieve financial independence, and robust laws should be enacted to support them. Men must be taught to respect women and understand that women are not foolish, weak, or incapable—these are notions that the government instils in people's minds to maintain its power (396).

Taken together, these narratives not only challenge state legal structures but also express a forward-looking aspiration for justice. The participants' demands for reform, accountability,

and gender equality signal a clear desire to challenge both the legal structures of state-sanctioned discrimination and the epistemic marginalisation of women's voices within this study context.

Conclusion: Bringing Together Structural Injustice and Women's Epistemic Resistance

Based on the aims of the study, three key themes emerged from participants' responses: the importance of education and awareness-raising, the challenge to honour-based norms, and the need for legal reform. Each of these speaks to broader concerns about how gendered power operates culturally, legally, and institutionally and how women in this sample resist and rearticulate justice under constraint.

The findings suggest that many of the women who responded to this survey described navigating and resisting what they perceived as intersecting structural and epistemic injustices embedded in the fabric of their society. As the analysis has shown, participants often framed VAW not simply as isolated acts, but as manifestations of deeper systemic inequalities – described by them as encoded in discriminatory laws, sustained through patriarchal cultural norms, and sometimes legitimised by religious interpretations. This interpretation is consistent with what has been described as state-sanctioned liberty crime (Author, 2016), where the law itself may enshrine and reinforce gendered power asymmetries. Within this framework, women are positioned not only as subordinate subjects but are sometimes represented as property of male guardians. This is, for example, reflected most starkly in legal constructions such as *tamkin khas*, which make sexual compliance a legal obligation.

At the same time, many of the women in this study articulated a refusal to accept these injustices as fixed or natural. Their calls for education, solidarity, legal reform, and cultural change reflect a civic aspiration for justice which is an intentional reclaiming of epistemic authority in the face of silencing and dismissal. These responses speak directly to Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice, particularly in how women's testimonies about VAW are routinely devalued (testimonial injustice) and how the conceptual tools necessary to interpret and name that violence are often lacking or contested (hermeneutical injustice). Yet rather than being passive recipients of harm, participants in this sample positioned themselves as active agents of knowledge, critique, and change.

This study does not claim generalisability. The Instagram-based survey has inherent limitations, including a likely bias toward urban, younger, and digitally connected women. It is also shaped by self-selection, with those who chose to respond potentially differing from those who did not (for example, in characteristics such as age, digital access, education, or prior engagement with gender and violence). The cross-sectional, self-reported nature of the data means that prevalence, causality, and change over time cannot be inferred, nor can the experiences of offline, rural, older or otherwise marginalised women be assumed. Yet the breadth and clarity of responses, despite the lack of prompts, suggest that the concepts of violence, justice, and resistance are highly salient in the everyday lives of this group of Iranian women. Their refusal to remain silent, and their insistence on being heard, points to a vital epistemic effort: reclaiming the right to define what justice means on their own terms.

As demonstrated by reform efforts in other Muslim-majority contexts, progress in authoritarian settings is rarely linear or achieved through legal reform alone. Literature on ‘planned social change’ highlights that effective transformation often depends on building coalitions, cultivating public legitimacy, and developing shared vocabularies through which injustice can be recognised and contested. This approach highlights the importance of understanding local political dynamics and empowering local actors to lead change (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). This resonates with the narratives in this study, where participants located the roots of violence sometimes in cultural structures, yet simultaneously asserted that ‘change is possible’, a form of epistemic resistance rooted in civic commitment, not only individual experience. However, it cannot be ignored that feminist activists in Iran face significant risks, including arrest and violence, when they challenge state-imposed gender restrictions. These risks exist within a broader context in which political shifts have consistently reinforced patriarchal interpretations of family law, limiting women’s rights and freedoms under the guise of religious authority (Zakiyya et al., 2024). In response to these constraints, Iranian feminists have increasingly turned to digital platforms to resist, organise, and voice dissent. For example, hashtag feminism has become a vital strategy for identity-based resistance and political coalition-building, even in the face of censorship and surveillance. Despite Twitter being officially banned in Iran, activists have used hashtags to contest gendered laws and advocate for cultural and legislative reform, often linking their demands to broader visions of justice and equality.

(Kharazmi & Abadi, 2024). This form of digital engagement exemplifies how civic aspiration for justice can emerge and thrive in constrained political environments.

In this sense, the findings from this study both challenge and contribute to existing frameworks of gender justice. While international human rights instruments tend to foreground legal equality, participants in this study emphasised the need for cultural transformation, educational reform, and the redefinition of concepts such as honour, gender roles, and justice itself. Their testimonies suggest that any meaningful effort to address violence against women must engage with the epistemological terrain in which such violence is either justified or contested. Taken together, this study contributes to wider debates on gender justice in Muslim contexts by illustrating, within this non-representative sample, how women's voices, though often marginalized, constitute a powerful site of critique and imagination. Their calls for justice are not simply demands for formal equality but assertions of the right to be heard, to define violence on their own terms, and to challenge the moral and legal frameworks that have historically excluded them. At the same time, these findings should be read as interpretive insights drawn from this specific online sample, rather than as claims about the prevalence or distribution of these views across the broader population.

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Competing interests: The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical statements: Ethical approval was obtained for both primary data collection in Iran and secondary data analysis in the UK. Data collection in Iran was approved by the independent internal ethics committee of Mehre Shams Afarid (MSA), a non-governmental organisation supporting women affected by violence. Secondary data analyses were approved by the ethics committee at City, University of London (VISION consortium; reference ETH21220–299). The study complies with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (Article 23, paragraph 3).

Participant Information Sheet:

Before starting the anonymous 30-item online survey ($\approx 5\text{--}7$ minutes) titled “A survey on women's health and relationships,” participants (16+) were given a Participant Information Sheet and provided electronic written consent. It was explained that participation was voluntary; questions could be skipped; withdrawal was permitted at any time before submission, with no data retained thereafter. No direct identifiers (name, address, contact details) were collected. Data are kept confidential and reported only in academic and public outlets. The PIS noted possible sensitivity (relationships, violence, health), no direct personal benefit, and signposted support/resources and contacts.

Consent form:

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation. Consent was obtained between February 2020 and January 2022. Consent was collected electronically via an online consent form, which participants were required to read and complete before accessing the survey. By ticking the consent box, participants confirmed that they had read the study information and agreed to participate voluntarily. The consent process was administered by the third author via the online survey builder platform called Porsline.

Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study (to explore women's health and relationships, including experiences of violence and abuse), the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any time prior to submission, and the confidential and anonymous handling of data. No identifying information (such as names, addresses, or contact details) was collected, ensuring complete anonymity.

The consent form outlined the **scope of consent**, including agreement to (1) participate in the study; (2) allow anonymised responses to be used for analysis, research, and publication; and (3) understanding that support service information was provided should any question cause distress.

A copy of the consent script is available upon request.

Data availability: The data used in this study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions. While the raw data cannot be shared, questions about the dataset or study can be directed to the second author (Dr Ladan Hashemi, ladan.hashemi@citystgeorges.ac.uk).

Authors' contributions:

First Author: Analysed the data and wrote the first draft.

Second Author: Reviewed the drafts

Third Author: Collected the data and reviewed the draft.

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