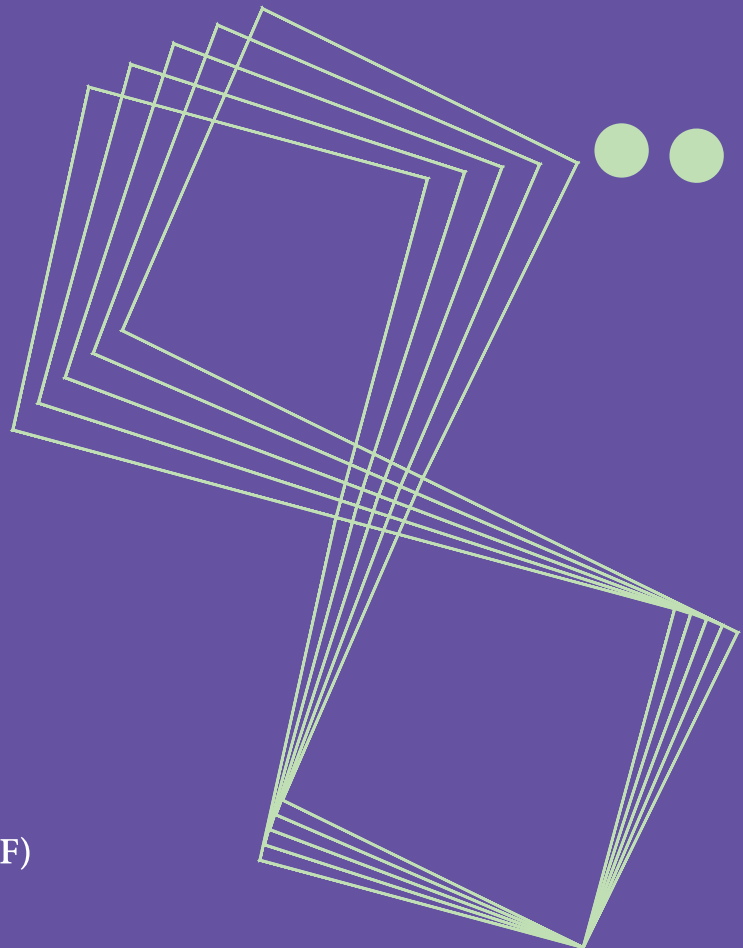




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Gendered Resistance in the Face of Death: Challenging the Division of Labor and Space Exclusion in Funeral and Burial Rituals in Egypt

My father passed away in January 2018. I was studying in London back then. Once I heard he was admitted to hospital in a critical condition I booked a ticket to return to Cairo to be with him. While arranging the trip, looking for someone to stay with my daughter, and booking accommodation, I found myself wondering if I had enough black outfits. I worried about what to wear knowing what the strict bodily regulations imposed on women are in these circumstances. I felt angry and frustrated that this took up so much space in my mind at such a moment.

I was expecting my father's death and instead of thinking of my goodbye or confronting my emotions and loss, I was occupied with the many social scenarios I was about to face. I am the eldest daughter; I would want to be in charge of everything, but would they let me? What if I am too late and he passes away before I arrive, will I be allowed to see him and touch him for the last time? So many thoughts were running through my head. I haven't seen the family in far too long. This shirt is black but a bit tight, maybe it is better to pack another one.

I look back at my experiences with funeral and burial rituals with agony. The moment of death, losing someone dear to you is a life-changing event; what happens now remains forever. When I was 19, I was deprived of going to the funeral and burial of my grandmother and my exclusion from the burial was explicitly tied to sexuality. I still recall hearing my uncle strictly

tell my mother that I cannot be there "like that", indicating my uncovered hair and trousers. My presence constituted a sexual distraction in moments of grief and sadness, and this deprived me of being a part of the commemoration of a person I deeply loved. It was a punitive consequence of my womanhood.

With the death of my father and from the first moments of the surrounding rituals, I experienced rejection and exclusion. I was denied entry to the room where my father's body was being washed as my presence as a woman was not desirable. In the mosque where we had the funeral prayer, I stayed with my aunt in the women's room, completely isolated from the main hall. I remember these moments with grief and sadness. All I wanted was to be close to my father's body in the last moments before his burial, but I couldn't because of my sex. The complete sex segregation in the ritual process deprived me of being by my father's body or from performing some rituals, like the washing of his body, something I would have loved to do as an act of love and as a form of emotional closure.

Throughout the rituals, I was constantly asked to suppress my emotions, as they are signs of fragility. They threatened to kick me out of the morgue and the mosque, and I was continuously reminded that my father would be punished for my tears and that his soul would be trapped if I cried after his death. I couldn't even bear the consequences of my emotionality, my father, as a

man was responsible for me even after his death. My natural emotional reaction of grief and sadness to the death of my father was shamed, undesired and used against me to exclude me from the rituals.

I remember I was the first to arrive at the hospital after my father's passing. I got a call from my aunt who instructed me to just wait until a man from the family arrived to start the formalities. I had, however, already started arranging the necessary formalities and paying for the arrangements. As a woman performing a role strictly reserved for men, my actions and decisions were criticized.

After my father's funeral prayer, I went out to join the burial only to find the women who were praying blocking my way, asking me to wait for the men to go first. "But I will miss the burial if I wait!" I answered, to which they replied that I should not see the burial anyway. By the time I could get out of the crowd to try to join the burial I found men blocking my way. As a woman I was not allowed to be in such close proximity to the men. Describing the control of men over space, Grosz (1995, 122) says, "Men have contained women in a death like tomb". Being subordinated and alienated based on your sex in a moment of grief and loss did indeed feel like a death tomb.

Research Context

After my father's funeral and burial and upon my return to London, I turned to research and academia as a tool of healing. I studied how funeral and burial rituals in Egypt are gendered and their impact on gender performativity in relation to binary masculinity and femininity. During my research and interviews with my research participants Ali and Mariam, I observed how we mediate masculine and feminine traits assigned to each of us during the rituals.

The Quran does not describe funeral and burial rituals in detail. Ritual performances are based instead on the Hadith (sayings of the prophet

When I was 19, I was deprived of going to the funeral and burial of my grandmother and my exclusion from the burial was explicitly tied to sexuality

Muhammed) and the opinions of Muslim jurists (Davies, 2007). Islamic philosophical thought is diverse when it comes to these rituals. The Coptic rituals differ slightly as the deceased are buried in coffins and in their favorite outfit. This suggests that the rituals therefore reflect social habits rather than religious impositions. Whether the rituals are purely religious or socially imposed is beyond the scope of my research as a lack of evidence prevents a definite determination. I would like to focus here on who has the power over the organization of the rituals as it stands today. I therefore describe the rituals and their phases as they happen in Egypt currently and how I personally experienced them multiple times.

In Egyptian Muslims' funeral and burial rituals there is an apparent labor division and sex segregation. Males are supposed to arrange everything, including hiring someone to wash the body and transport it to the mosque and graveyards. Men are also expected to pay for everything. When condolence services are hosted at home, females are in charge of cooking and serving food while males receive condolences. After the funeral prayer, women are discouraged from accompanying the body to burial. There is a complete separation between men and women during the rituals. Women are not allowed to bury the dead person, hold the bier, or walk behind it. Once more, the rituals can vary from one place to another.

Within this realm, I revisit our experiences with funeral and burial rituals in the passing of each of our fathers. I do this aiming to explore the acts of resistance we performed during funeral and burial rituals in relation to the gendered labor division and women's exclusion from the rituals. I examine our defiance to the existing structure of the performed rituals as gender resistance. I define gender resistance, in accordance with Scott (1989, 34) as an "everyday resistance" and what he describes as "the quiet, piecemeal process" not tied to collective political or social resistance movements. These acts of resistance constitute a potential for gender transformation as a consequence of a refusal to repeat the same rituals and norms but rather to subvert these rules and expose the unfairness and detrimental effect on identity formation.

Reflections on Research Methods

My choice of research method stems from my belief that there is an important body of knowledge that comes from personal and lived experiences, that every story deserves to be told and that each symbol has a meaning. Personal narratives and auto-ethnography also give insights into details that are unmanageable to grasp through other qualitative or quantitative research methods.

According to Squire (2014, 5) it is "...Narratives' rootedness in the particular that allows them to bring into research, phenomena that are new, ignored, or recalcitrant because of their complexity". Narrative inquiry also assumes that there is no absolute truth in human lives and reality and that there is no correct reading or interpretation of anything, rather it advocates for pluralism and subjectivity.

On the other hand, auto-ethnography is an approach to research and writing that "seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (Ellis et al. 2011, 1). In this auto-ethnography, I place myself within a cultural and political context aiming at exposing cultural dynamics working on different level of consciousness depending on how it links my personal life to the cultural or political (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, 739).

Anzaldua (1987) encourages us to look beyond the unitary subject—the representative—and study the different sets of culture connections that makes us who we are, while Spivak (2003) questions representation and how to give voices to the subjugated, rather than being their voices. Studying life stories and lived experiences allows researchers to not only immerse themselves in the research context and its cultural meanings but also to reflect on their own positionality producing knowledge that is more human, culturally appropriate and just. Further, this approach to research is sensitive to the "heterogeneity of experience and power" (Alldred and Gillis, 2012, 50). It allows for the researcher's intentions to be recognized and acknowledged.

Equally, in order to approach research as a political tool, Alldred and Gillis (2012, 49) encourage us to examine the "the knowledge relations" within the research as well as "the ethics of these knowledge relations, who claims to know, how, and the power relationship produced by this". In my research, I have attempted to give voice to my participants to explore their experiences rather than being their voice. I approach the research process as a "dialogic" process that is ongoing and intersubjective, hoping to create a "research situation that is structured by both the researcher and the persons being researched"

(England, 1994, 82). This research has been a mutual learning experience where I positioned myself as both researcher and research participant. In more than one instance, Mariam and Ali asked me to answer the same questions I asked them: simply put, the research has been an exchange. After completing my analysis, I sent them both my draft to revise it in order to avoid any misinterpretation of their personal stories.

My presence constituted a sexual distraction in moments of grief and sadness, and this deprived me of being a part of the commemoration of a person I deeply loved. It was a punitive consequence of my womanhood

I approached this writing as a healing process following the tragedy of my father's passing. Academia has relevance to me when theory speaks to life and there is no divide between the two. Analyzing and untangling the experiences surrounding my father's death has been significant in my personal processing. Throughout my interviews and due to the sensitivity of the topic, I have hoped my interviewees would approach it in the same way. One day after our last interview Mariam sent me a text message thanking me for providing her with a safe space to express her feelings and thoughts about this experience, a space she never had before. She mentioned she felt safe and understood. Ali thanked me for speaking of the unspoken. We also exchanged this: spaces and comfort to share healing by sharing my ideas, exploring them and making sense of our experiences, believing in what Grace Giorgio (2009, 149) says "In writing to heal ourselves, we help others to heal, we make our personal political".

Funeral and Burial Rituals in Egypt

Once a Muslim person is pronounced dead the body is washed in preparation for burial. The body is then moved to the mosque to perform the funeral prayer, salat al-janazah, and attendees pray for the forgiveness of the deceased. After the prayer, the body is transported to the graveyard for the burial. Following the burial, Muslim families have the choice to conduct a memorial service, referred to as a'aza, in either a mosque or the home. The sex segregation and labor division in the distribution of tasks are evident in the rituals.

I. Sex Segregation

While dealing with the loss of our fathers, Mariam and I were asked to suppress our emotions, as they are signs of weakness and irrationality. We had both lost a father; anger, sadness, and grief are a natural consequence to the experience we were going through. I was asked to leave the morgue and the mosque several times if I could not stop crying. We were both prohibited from joining the funeral or attending the burial on the pretext of our emotionality.

Mariam poetically describes what the expectations are of a female whose father dies:

"Do you know how on the wedding day as a bride you are supposed to be the center of attention? Everyone is looking at you? Waiting for a certain reaction from you? It is the same when your father dies. Everyone looks at you, everyone is expecting you to do something, everyone is watching you, as if there is a way to do it. You know when you are supposed to dance with your groom, wear high heels? Just like that, it is expected

that your sadness and grief fall into a façade already prescribed on how your grief as a woman who lost her father should be expressed.”

In their studies of Muslim funeral and burial rituals, Greenberg and Haddonfield (2007) noted how women are discouraged from accompanying the body to burial because of a belief that women lack emotional control in the face of death. Sara Ahmed (2004, 170), described this projection of emotion onto our bodies as “not only work[ing] to exclude us from the realms of thought and rationality” as women, but it “conceal[s] the emotional and embodied aspects of thought and reason”.

The sex segregation here becomes an indication of how “being emotional” is considered a trait of some bodies and not others (Ahmed, 2004). This stamp on the embodied emotional experience of women being irrational prevents us in many instances from expressing our feelings in fear of judgment. Our grief and sadness are in fact rational yet deemed unthoughtful based again on the assumption of irrationality in women and a false binary opposition of rationality and emotion. Consequently, the emotionality of women validates sex segregation.

The exclusion of women from certain spaces during rituals also opens discussion around the relationship between our bodies, feelings and space. Grosz (1995, 104) writes about how space has a significant “context and frame for the body” and affects the way the subject sees others as well as themselves. While Jana Nakhil (2015) tells us that space is a product of culture and that space is gendered, “it is in space that we project our innermost needs, but also our conscious and unconscious ideologies” (2015, 17). Space then affects the way we see others as well as our own understanding of our position and the different

forms of our existence within this space. Our exclusion as women left us feeling “homeless” in the confined spaces assigned to us in rituals, in our own bodies, “boxed out” using Mariam’s words. We felt alienated, inferior.

Sex segregation and women’s’ exclusion could, however, vary from one place to another. Ali described the women in his family as “socially empowered” as they were allowed to go to the graveyard but not attend the burial itself. Interestingly, Mariam pointed out that her mother goes to the graveyard in Cairo, but not in their home village. Exclusion differs depending on the context of the community. That fluctuation of access is yet another sign of women’s subordination and the power men have over the organization of space: women are allowed in graveyards when men ‘tolerate’ them, not by personal choice.


II. Labor Division:

After our fathers’ passing, Mariam and I were both instructed to wait until a man from the family arrives to start the formalities. Following the passing of both of Ali’s grandparents in the same month, he found himself in charge of organizing both funerals. He recalls how his father, aunt and uncle were overwhelmed in both incidents and someone “had to be in charge”. He says:


I love to take the initiative, no one asked me to do anything, it was chaotic, and grownups were devastated so I stepped in. No one had expectations from me I took the initiative to be in charge of everything with no second thought. If I think about it maybe I wouldn’t do it, burying my grandmother when I was 19, but I didn’t think about it I just did it.

The effect of the agencies of socialization such as schools, family, and other peer groups can lead to

men internalizing ideas around how they should behave, act and respond to difficult situations, including taking responsibility and initiative. Ali, although stating that no one expected him to be in charge, internalized these expectations as a man and acted upon them. In the aftermath of the two funerals, Ali describes an encounter with his grandmother on his mother's side. She asked him to sit on top of the dining table and announced to the family that, after his effort in the two funerals, he had officially become a man—the man of the house. He was “promoted” to a real man due to his actions and taking responsibility during the tragedy that the family faced. Ali willingly and successfully adhering to the expected performance of a man, earned his family's respect.



In Egyptian Muslims' funeral and burial rituals there is an apparent labor division and sex segregation



In early gender research, many writers emphasize that biological and sexual difference is reflected in a range of other differences whether physically (assuming men are stronger) or based on character and intellect (judging women to be more emotional and less rational). Connell and Pearse (2015, 42) called this the “character dichotomy”. The prevailing sexual code defined men and women as opposites. Thus, men would be more suitable for organizing the funeral and burial rituals since they can control their emotions in this difficult time. On the other hand, women, who are expected to be controlled by their emotions and feelings of loss, are appointed the tasks associated with womanhood.

Ali benefited from gendered inequality of the labor division as taking initiative gave him more power within the family. On the contrary, both

Mariam and I expected the family's objection to any attempt to be involved in the decision-making process. Nevertheless, it did not stop us from trying.

Gendered Resistance Resisting: How?

We have seen how Ali claimed his place in the process of the execution of the rituals while Mariam and I were refused this privilege. Nonetheless, we sought to take responsibilities that were not socially assigned to us. A moment of confrontation erupted between Mariam and her uncle when he sought to organize the a'aza in a mosque closer to his house while Mariam wanted to choose another one closer to where her father lived. She described this as the moment when she “...Realized their authority. They do not give you options, even when I offered to pay, they give you orders”. Following the refusal of the family, she insisted that another condolences ceremony would take place in their home village following the usual order of rituals, which is to open the family house, cook and serving lunch and tea to those who come to pay condolences: “My father respected those rituals, even if it has nothing to do with religion, so I wanted to do this for him. If I cannot choose anything else, then I will do this as he liked it.”

My experience was different. I was alone when my father passed away in the hospital. This gave me the authority and power to take some initiative that I otherwise would not have been able to take. I knew I did not have a say in many details, such as where the body would be buried or in which mosque the a'aza would take place. Driven by the feeling of ownership of my relationship with my father, I started the formal procedures for the funeral. I got the burial permission, arranged for someone to come to wash the body

and paid for everything. When my aunts arrived, they insisted I take back the money I spent. Their reason was that if my brother could not make it and pay for everything, then it is their role to pay for everything as they are all married. This says that the responsibility goes first to the man and if absent, a married woman using her husband's money would be responsible for the payment. I refused to take the money; it was something that I felt I had to do. He is my father, I am in charge, and I take ownership.

Ali's sister was fortunate enough to attend her father's burial only because Ali used his masculine power and announced that his sister would be present whether others like it or not. He remembers:

I used the same excuse they used with me whenever I tried to object to anything in the rituals, 'it is not the right time to argue' - so I announced it. 'My sister and her female friends are coming'. I signaled to the car with the coffin to move and walked towards the graveyards.

The sex difference that the labor division in the rituals is based on creates the social pattern of responsibility for each gender. Connell and Pearse (2015, 6) propose that we perform our gender role in our everyday life by "claiming a place or responding to the place that has been given to us by the way we conduct ourselves" in different situations. In my case, the fact that I was alone presented an opportunity to step in and claim this role. Whilst in Mariam's story, her options were limited, and she was denied the opportunity of taking decisions in the presence of elder men in the family. However, she insisted on holding the condolences ceremony in her home village despite the family objection. A symbolic act that made Mariam feel in charge even if the labor division is again apparent in the distribution of tasks.

As a male deliberately flouting a gender norm by allowing his sister's presence in the burial, Ali also came under pressure. At the same time, it is his power as a male that allowed him to take such decisions. Ali resisted male dominance on space: "Space is a power tool" says Weisman (2003, 7). By using his masculine power and authority to include his sister in the burial ritual, Ali recognized how "spaces have the power to constrict or sustain us" (Nakhal 2015, 21) and did what he could to provide his sister with an equal experience to his. This is also a clear example of how in everyday resistance some might "... utilise their position of dominance available to them" (Johansson and Vinthagen 2013, 36) which allows them to resist in the first place.

Connell and Pearse (2015) argue that womanhood and manhood are not fixed. As a female taking responsibility for organizing the rituals of my father's death (though able to make limited decisions in the end) I exhibited traits of masculinity according to the social gender role. Similarly, Mariam's decision to hold the second condolences was a "symbolic" act of resistance (Scott 1989, 37), individual and personal, in which she sought an opportunity to exert some form of control within the ritual's organization. It did not openly contest or defy existing rules of power or the structure of the funeral and burial rituals themselves. Resistance here is about a certain action that we took in a certain context, a practice that is "not politically articulated or formally organised" (Johansson and Vinthagen 2013, 10). This practice is entangled with "everyday power, not separated, dichotomous or independent" (ibid, 1).

In all our experiences we tried to bend, change, and act in the way that was expected from us whether it was being feminine enough or masculine enough. Our resistance and mediation of the gendered labored division renders gender polarity fluid.

Resisting: Why?

“I want to speak about anger, my anger and what I have learned from my travels through its dominions” (Lorde 1981, 5)



I also want to speak about complaints, a complaint as “busy, crowded and intense” (Ahmed 2020, 1). That moment of realization that we are in an unpleasant situation, that something needs to change, something needs to be done. Ahmed (2020,1) describes that moment of realization, admitting to yourself that you have a complaint about something “you first have to admit to something, to recognize something as being wrong, as being something, you need to complain about”.

She reminds us how women’s complaints are often portrayed as “making a fuss” (Ahmed 2020, 2). How our first instinct is to doubt ourselves: is what I am complaining about really worth the fuss? I go back to the moment when I was refused entry to the room where my father’s body was being washed. I recall my aunt questioning my intention repeating what the family always thought of me, “You just want to object to anything and everything”. I was surprised it took me a minute to affirm myself after I immediately questioned my own feelings and motives. “The work of complaint can also involve an internal process of coming to terms with what you are experiencing” (Ahmed 2020, 3). I was experiencing exclusion, in moments of grief I was deprived from what I thought would be my closure after my father’s death. In my last act of material love towards him my complaint was dismissed and my intentions questioned - I was angry.

During our conversations Mariam spoke a lot about anger: “My first emotion is always anger and then I start processing, I go straight to anger and then I can feel anything else” she says. She expresses her anger at the men of her family for

taking all the decisions in the funeral and burial rituals of her father. She experienced anger, before grief. I recall how my emotional process was the opposite: I felt disgust and rejection that then turned to anger.

According to Gorton (2007, 334) “Feeling is negotiated in the public sphere and experienced through the body”. This recognition of the political, cultural and “psychoanalytic implications” of emotions is what Swan (2008, 89) termed as the “emotionalization of the society”, where emotions become a tool of knowledge production about the self as well as the relations with others.

 **The exclusion of women from certain spaces during rituals also opens discussion around the relationship between our bodies, feelings and space** 

Our anger was “about” the labor division, about our exclusion from the decision-making process. It was about preventing us from seeing our fathers being buried, from having one last glimpse at them before they physically leave our lives. An anger “about” our bodies as women that were excluded from certain spaces, “about” the shaming of our emotionality that this exclusion is based on. This “aboutness” of our emotions means they engage us in a standpoint on the world and are a way of knowing the world (Ahmed, 2004, p.7).

Mariam’s anger, and my own anger were “loaded with information and energy” as Lorde (1984, 124) describes anger. An anger “constructed in different ways as a response to injustice” as Sara Ahmed portrays it (Ahmed 2004, 175). Our anger in these different situations is an interpretive response to the world around us.

This interpretation is a form of knowledge produced through the experience of practicing those rituals. Boler (1999) argues that emotions implicate a critical form of inquiry and also lead to unconventional forms of knowledge. Understanding our anger and what is behind it, what it led to and how it made us feel helps understand why women's emotionality, and in particular, anger, is reasonable and not "an evidence of poor reasoning" (Ahmed 2004, 177).

Thus, emotions as knowledge intensified our understanding of exclusion and alienation. Anger is then a translation of Mariam's pain and mine into knowledge. This knowledge drives us both to push the boundaries looking for an equal experience with men. Here I want to acknowledge the act of complaining as our first step of resistance. Our complaints were driven by anger and our gender resistance is fueled with our anger and was not possible without it.

Gendered Resistance in Religious Rituals Practice

The act of resistance performed by the research participants and I can be depicted as "everyday resistance". I recognize everyday resistance as a "practice" apart from a specific consciousness or an outcome. These acts are deeply embedded in the power relations and discourses around the rituals. Our everyday resistance is intersectional as the powers it engages with are heterogenic and contingent as it differs from one situation or context to another (Johansson and Vinthagen 2013). Within this realm, Lila Abu Lughod (1990, 41) encourages us not to romanticize what she calls "unconventional forms or non-collective resistance". Rather to look at them as tools of "diagnostic of power" (Abu Lughod 1990, 41). Our experiences facing the death of our respective fathers were deeply rooted in relations

of power around gender hierarchy, social norms in the name of the institutional power of religion. Studying the act of resistance within this context can "teach us about the complex interworking of historically changing structures of power" (Abu Lughod 1990, 53).

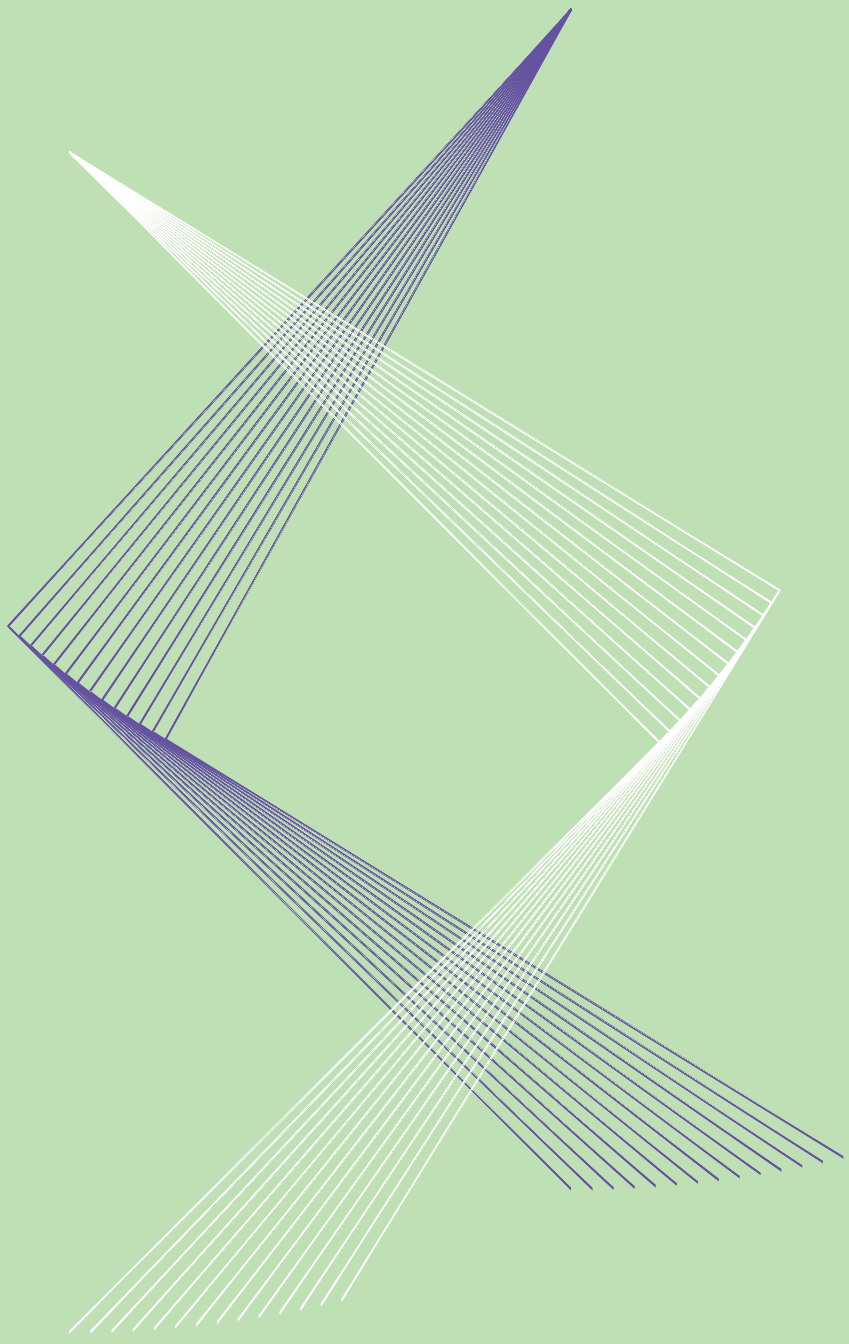
On the other hand, studying everyday resistance within religious rituals practice opens the door for what Johansson and Vinthagen (2013, 37) describe as an uncovering and an analysis of "unrecognized assumptions, power dynamics, discursive structures and social change potentials of different forms of resistance, guided by non-conventional intentions, actors, contexts and means". They add that for this to happen, we need to be more open and receptive to "identify and incorporate unexpected resistance – one that is not so embedded in prevalent power discourses". On the way back to Cairo I knew I was going to resist some of the rules imposed on me. On the contrary, Mariam and Ali did not have the intention to "resist" and did not identify their actions as resistance until we talked about them. They were simply asking for what they both viewed as their rights.

Negotiating the place and role of women in the rituals often happens. The point is how difficult it is to hold these conversations at times of loss and shock. I recently listened to a colleague describing how when her father died in their home, and while looking to hire someone to wash the body, they intentionally hired someone who would allow her, her mother and her sister to be present. Was she allowed to wash the body of her father, yes! But I can only imagine the toll it took on her mental state in such a moment, having to negotiate what she sees as her right.

Ahmed (2020, 4) explains that "the absence of other complaints can make it hard to recognize there is something to complain about". This research is my complaint, I claim there is

something to complain about, so that further complaints can be recognized. I hope and imagine that one day in Egypt we can witness something similar as the funeral of the Tunisian activist Lina Ben Mhenni. For Lina's funeral, her female friends carried the bier to her graveyard. Despite the shaming of emotionality and the loud voices of women in funeral and rituals as we have seen, Bin Mhenni's funeral was full of chants, singing, clapping and was dominated by a female presence. Women claimed their right to grieve their loss in their own ways.





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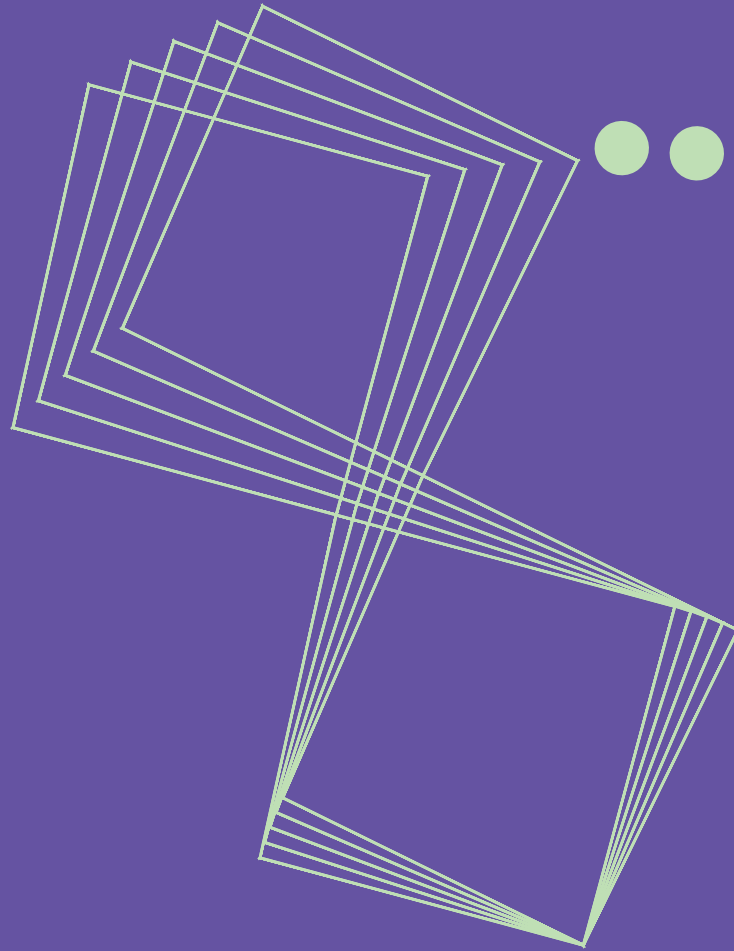
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