



Remembering through #LetUsTalk: an affective archive narrating Iranian women's everyday trauma and resistance habits

Golnar Gishnizjani

To cite this article: Golnar Gishnizjani (18 Apr 2024): Remembering through #LetUsTalk: an affective archive narrating Iranian women's everyday trauma and resistance habits, Journal of Gender Studies, DOI: [10.1080/09589236.2024.2342991](https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2342991)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2342991>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 18 Apr 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 25



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Remembering through #LetUsTalk: an affective archive narrating Iranian women's everyday trauma and resistance habits

Golnar Gishnizjani 

Media Studies, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

ABSTRACT

This article explores the intersection of hashtag activism, remembering practices, and the diaspora by focusing on the #LetUsTalk hashtag. Employing feminist memory studies, it examines the evocation of objects, occasions, and experiences associated with the hashtag, particularly focusing on diasporic Iranian women's memories of compulsory hijab and how these memories are embodied and remembered. This article argues that #LetUsTalk is a form of hashtag memory activism enabling diasporic Iranian women to shape an archive of affect. Within this archive, a diverse range of affective responses, bodily reactions, and resistance habits emerge as participants recall forgotten, mundane, and unwanted memories. Through conducting memory work, it sheds light on the capacity of hashtag memory activism to create a space for collective remembrance. In this type of collective remembering, non-participants add their voices to hashtag contributors to unveil hidden struggles of everyday life in connection with mundane memory objects, leading to the generation of new political and transformative actions even if they perform in a minor key.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 July 2023

Accepted 26 February 2024

KEYWORDS

Hashtag memory activism;
an archive of affect;
remembering practices, co-rememberers

Introduction

In December 2021, old images of little girls wearing hijabs alongside their current images as adults without hijabs grabbed my attention on Facebook. The images and stories shared under the #LetUsTalk hashtag remind me of my own experiences as an Iranian woman living abroad. Masih Alinejad, an exiled Iranian journalist, created this hashtag after the *Canadian Medical Association Journal's* retraction and apology of a letter about the hijab. The letter had faced criticism for being Islamophobic, as a paediatric surgeon claimed that featuring a girl in a hijab on the CMAJ cover normalized a potentially traumatic practice.¹ Meanwhile, US Congresswoman Ilhan Omar introduced the Combating International Islamophobia Act,² igniting the discussion that in the West, criticism of Islam is silenced under the pretence of Islamophobia. Alinejad shared two photos of herself on social media, one as a child in Iran wearing a headscarf and the other as an adult in the US with the freedom to go out into public without the hijab. This post invited other women who found the compulsory hijab oppressive to talk about their stories. The responses, mainly from diasporic Iranian women, displayed images of women pictured in everyday life, family occasions, school days, passport photos, and sports events. Alinejad has posted them all on *My Stealthy Freedom* Facebook

CONTACT Golnar Gishnizjani  Golnar.g.gishnizjani@utu.fi  Media Studies, University of Turku, Kastuntie 47 A 11, Turku 20500, Finland

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

page, with captions describing the contributors' experiences. Like previous digital campaigns Alinejad started, this one also sparked various responses (Tafakori, 2021). While some have supported the hashtag, some feminist activists and academics have criticized it on social media (Saeidi, 2022) for its Islamophobic agenda and for amplifying orientalist tropes presenting Iranian women as oppressed objects.

Even though the anti-orientalist critique and how the hashtag might be perceived in the West should be taken seriously, I believe exploring the varied ways Iranian women trace their lives through and within #LetUsTalk posts generates possibilities for collective remembering. In this article, through engaging with memory work and similar remembrances by other Iranian women in Finland, whom I consider my 'co-rememberers', I explore #LetUsTalk as a case of hashtag memory activism and analyse how this connective device facilitates the articulation of memories of body policing among diasporic Iranian women. Smit (2020) claims that memory work in media studies is a 'social process wherein connections are made, and continually remade, between mediating and associating people, technologies, objects, and ideas' (p. 89). Therefore, #LetUsTalk is only one aspect of memory work; another part examines how confronting the hashtag prompts non-participants in the offline world to reflect on their memories, see their individual experiences in connection with others, and find a collective meaning for them.

This article expands the notion of 'hashtag memory activism' by considering the nexus among hashtag activism, remembering practices, and diaspora. Although hashtag memory activism is defined as a tool for participation in online commemoration concerning an unwanted past amid or after conflict (Fridman, 2022), I suggest that it also enables the disclosure of personal memories in different forms and reveals invisible layers of struggles embedded in everyday life. To further expound on the role of #LetUsTalk in this process, I ask what objects, occasions, and experiences addressed in the hashtag evoke memories and how the memories of constant body surveillance are remembered within and through the body. Drawing upon feminist memory studies, I explore the significance of memory work in constructing alternative forms of documenting minoritized lives.

In digital and Iranian diaspora studies, some scholars have examined how diasporic Iranians utilize digital platforms to share political dissent, personal stories about exile, nostalgia, and trauma, and how this forms solidarity between those inside and outside the country or, conversely, supports right-wing and Islamophobic political discourse (Doostdar, 2004; Naghibi, 2016; Nasirpour, 2016; Rahbari, 2021; Rahimi, 2003; Shakhsari, 2020). Behrouzan (2016) has differentiated between the concepts of trauma, 'toroma' [in Farsi], and social rupture to analyse the psychopolitics of well-being after the Iran – Iraq war, moving beyond the understanding of trauma as solely an individual matter. She emphasizes that the universalization of trauma leads to certain therapeutic solutions that often miss collective memory – an act that is tied to history and context. Followingly, Mir Miri (2022) has defined toroma 'as the impact on an affected social group, through the bodies of its individuals, whose agency is distorted and interrupted by the violence of overdetermined interpretation' (p. 30). I position my research in the continuum of these studies and Iranian feminist scholarship on the hijab. However, by focusing on hashtag memory activism as a space that creates different forms of remembering practices, I heed the capacity of sharing memory fragments concerning the hijab in both digital and material spaces as political acts.

I argue that the diasporic Iranian women's contributions to #LetUsTalk, and my co-rememberers remembering demonstrate how mundane memories with traumatic effects do not merely vocalize injustice but also illuminate resistance habits and demand new transformative actions. To start, I describe hashtag memory activism as a means of discussing how traumatic memories can form an 'archive of affect' (Kyrölä & Huuki, 2021). I then present a detailed explanation of the research method, followed by the analysis, which I have divided into three sections, each of which I consider to be separated but complementary fragments of memory. The first section clarifies the objects that bring memories back to life. The 'trauma of the routine' (Onwuachi-Willig, 2016) resulting from these memory objects is explored in the second section. The connection between memory objects and the trauma

of the routine that shapes the archive of affect is the subject of the third section. Lastly, I conclude with how outraged bodies, influenced by the trauma of routines, contribute to the evolution of the archive of affect.

Hashtag memory activism: catalysing the archive of affect

In conceptualizing hashtag memory activism, Fridman (2022) considers tags as a mnemonic practice to engage with ‘banned commemoration, contested events, silenced and unwanted memories, and with concealed pasts’ (p. 133). Taking a cue from this approach, I assert that in activism, utilizing hashtags is also a practice of remembering daily life fragments in which memories may take on new meanings and render alternative political acts. In the #LetUsTalk case, hashtagging is the practice of actively engaging in the remembering process, bringing seemingly insignificant yet unwanted memories to the forefront. By emphasizing the key role of participation, Fridman (2022) claims mnemonic practice would only arise if non-state actors as memory agents shared their stories. #LetUsTalk contributors are also non-state actors in the diaspora who carry unwanted memories and use their privileged position as faraway individuals who no longer directly experience harm to disclose sensitive stories (Gutman & Wüstenberg, 2021). Within the #LetUsTalk hashtag, past experiences are scattered and do not allude to a specific historical event or fixed period. They share moments of life they have experienced on a mundane level to illustrate that the past remains ongoing and their memories can stand for someone else’s present life. Their contributions set up a space for others who did not participate in the hashtag to become involved in reinterpreting the past.

In the remembering process, non-participants, including me and my co-rememberers, resonate with the experiences shared under #LetUsTalk. Traumatic anecdotes recounted by the hashtag’s contributors evoke in us the desire to share our stories related to similar occurrences (see Eyerman, 2015). Following Onwuachi-Willig (2016) utilization of critical race studies, I understand such experiences as the trauma of the routine that emerges during expected occurrences. She further asserts that persistent expectations of subordination perpetuated by and through law create a traumatic narrative. When it comes to compulsory hijab, I add religion, surveillance in educational settings, and familial control as mechanisms that work hand-in-hand with the legal compulsion in shaping the trauma of the routine narrative. This concept aligns with Cvetkovich (2007) perspective on ‘trauma that focuses on the everyday and insidious rather than the catastrophic, and that depathologizes trauma and situates it in a social and cultural frame rather than a medical one’ (p. 464). Despite the considerable attention paid to compulsory hijab in academia and mainstream media, traumas endured by Iranian women have been relatively overlooked in conventional archival documents.

The recurrence of the trauma of routine memories manifests as a flashback, wherein the previously suppressed feelings resurface upon encountering familiar objects and occasions. This reveals a range of affective expressions that result in forging an archive of affect. Reframing Cvetkovic (2003) notion of an archive of feeling, Kyrölä and Huuki (2021) argue an archive of affect is constantly folding, living, and transforming interest in tendencies, flows, and collectivities and consists of traces, fragments, and political acts (pp. 76–83). This archive is an assemblage of the ‘past that can be painful to remember, impossible to forget’ (Cvetkovic, 2003, p. 241). Therefore, I focus on memory objects to explain that the archive of affect encompasses personal objects that hold a variety of meanings and values beyond what is apparent on the surface (Kuhn, 2010). I concentrate on verbal/non-verbal expressions to elaborate on how the revival of memories with traumatic effects elicits varied affective responses that contribute to the perpetuation of the archive. These responses can call for new actions, invite non-participants to engage with hashtag contributors, and reimagine the past or what remains from the past as the site of political practice.

Research design and methodology

From the early days of my following #LetUsTalk, some posts made me shiver, gave me goosebumps, and took me to the past. I could read my experiences between the lines, and this resonance moved me to go through some personal objects in my family home on a trip to Iran. I looked through items and images from my childhood and school days and decided to bring a selection of them with me to Finland. Inspired by this experience, I was eager to know how others would relate to the hashtag. Hence, I conducted thematic interviews with Iranian women in Finland in May 2022 and used hashtag posts as research materials and memory cues in the interviews. The hashtag was circulating on different platforms and went viral twice after the first round of popularity.³ However, the posts I used in my research were shared during the initial wave of the hashtag on the *My Stealthy Freedom* Facebook account, as most people sent their stories to Alinejad.

To reach out to co-rememberers, I first shared invitations on Facebook and Telegram groups run by Iranians in Finland. At this point, many expressed their interest in participating, but felt uncomfortable talking about the past. Therefore, I asked volunteers to share the invitation with their social circles. Ultimately, six women participated in the research, and we talked in two different groups in Turku (a total of 270 minutes of recorded material). Co-rememberers (ranging from 31–38 years old) were first-generation migrants who had grown up in Iran but had been living in Finland for two to 20 years. Except for one who had moved to Finland as a social refugee, others had migrated as students. All were born into Muslim families, and without compulsion, they do not wear the hijab. The interviews were conducted in Farsi, as it was the first language of all co-rememberers. The interviews were analysed using Farsi data, and then quotations were translated into English, but the selected posts from the hashtag were written in English.

The memory work guidelines from Haug (1987), which focus on understanding the social construction of gender in women's lives, informed the design of my research. Haug (2008) emphasizes that memory work is not remembering how something really happened but how people connect their personal memories to power structures. Taking the plasticity of this approach, I altered it to fit the topic, context, and research requirements. Among all the hashtag's images, some affected me more deeply, evoking forgotten moments and reminding me of similar images in my personal albums. In Moreno Figueroa (2008) words, I looked emotionally at the images appearing on my screen, felt a strong connection to them, and could articulate my experiences of compulsory hijab by engaging with the images. This prompted me to delve into my personal photos and select the ones that were compatible with the online images.

Eventually, I placed six images on the table and asked my co-rememberers to write down the first memory that came to their minds. Despite the small number of images, I noticed not picking the images with the same settings to provide more room for remembering and discussion. Therefore, each item showcases varied instances: two on different occasions at school, one family occasion, one sports event, one ID card, and one in an unknown public space. Our discussions were enriched by the sharing of my personal images; however, I just used them to foster a safe environment and did not turn them into topics of our conversations.

I am aware that the selected posts do not represent the full range of the hashtag; likewise, neither do my co-rememberers. Hence, this study does not aim to produce generalized claims. Co-rememberers were notified that they could leave at any time or stop speaking. Furthermore, the Ethics Committee for Human Sciences at the University of Turku reviewed this research. All the participants received an informed consent form, a study summary, and a privacy notice. I have adopted all the steps mentioned in the ethical review. This included using pseudonyms, redacting all information that could reveal the identity of my co-rememberers, and updating them on research progress.

First fragment: memories come back through confronting hashtag memory objects

After showing the images in the first interview, it took 15 minutes until one of us said, 'Let me start as I have exactly the same image sitting on the edge of howz [axis pool]⁴ with a compulsory chador at school⁵' (Negar, 37 years). This evocation happened in both groups and reflected my early engagement with the hashtag's images. Considering such experiences, I suggest that #LetUsTalk images are the first memory prompt. Images have always been a significant part of memory activists' toolkits (Memou, 2013). #LetUsTalk is not an exception; however, unlike the typical process in digital memory activism, the images are neither symbolic, indexical, nor iconic (see Merrill, 2020). They also differ from digitized vintage photos that Malek (2021) considers a source of 'clickbait orientalism'; such photos shared by the Iranian diaspora often glorify the pre-revolution era (1950s to 1979), evoke nostalgia, and use women's bodies to legitimize imperialism (Figure 1).

The shared images of young girls and women at family gatherings, schools, and sports activities may have been shot just for the sake of memory-making, or the images on ID cards may have been legal necessities at the time. Hashtag contributors shared images that were not intentionally captured to preserve the memory of specific experiences or convey particular meaning for the future. Therefore, the hashtag's images are akin to visual diaries of people that are supposed to be pieces of a family or personal albums, though they have materialized and been mediated in an unexpected way (Van Dijck, 2007). Due to their ordinariness, images rejuvenate vague memories and prick something under our skin. Seeing them reminds us of moments lost somewhere among the accumulated memories of everyday life. The images do not necessarily bring up identical moments, but our bodily reactions talk to us, giving us an 'aha! moment' and time to reflect on how the past is felt in the present:

These images remind me of the anguish my family caused me over my life. Wait a second, I'm shaking and about to cry . . . I grew up in a religious family where wearing a chador was not an option, but I tried to play with it or loosen it. One day, when my mom and I were walking, she complained about my hijab. She said: 'Don't walk next to me, don't follow me, you dishonor me'. My mom left me alone, and I was only 10. It wasn't the first time I experienced rejection for my hijab, but the most hurtful one. (Azin, 37 years)

Azin found no specific image provocative, though the selected images took her back to an unwanted moment. The remembrance began with trembling hands and voice, continued with added detail as she felt more at ease sharing the experience, and ended with naming the resurfaced feeling. Azin's memory shows that in the remembering process, 'images and signs become collectively seen,



Figure 1. Post that activated Negar's memory which was shared on January 4, 2022.

recognized, and experienced as traumatizing, disturbing or offensive only through their circulation and repetitive framing as such' (Kyrölä, 2015, p. 138). This collective viewing of hashtag images enables us to tap into our own embodied experiences and anticipate the feelings underneath the images. Through interacting with the images, we are involved in the process of imaginative engagement that goes beyond surface-level interpretations and unravels the latent struggles these visuals represent (Keightley & Pickering, 2012). Azin's remembrance embodies how the collective viewing of hashtag images through #LetUsTalk allows us to access and confront the profound affective responses embedded within them. It demonstrates the power of hashtag memory activism in fostering transformative engagement as we explore the intricate interplay of remembrances, memory objects, and bodily reactions.

#LetUsTalk images are a reconnection to personal collections. Given the mundanity of images and being among peers of the same generation, my co-rememberers reminisced about similar objects. Throughout the discussions, they mentioned what they had done to their images: 'I collected the childhood images that reminded me of such moments, put them in a box, and hid them away so I wouldn't recall what had happened' (Ladan, 33 years). While storing is one strategy for handling personal memory objects, travelling with them is a tactic for defying forgetfulness. Farnaz (32 years) explained, 'I took photos from some of the old images with my phone that I look at whenever I'm homesick. Yet, the beauty of recalling memories quickly fades, and I remember their dark effects.' Here, the memory objects have been dematerialized into more movable shapes to maintain the bonds to the past; however, the oscillation between different feelings shows the complexity of our engagement with memory objects. These excerpts highlight the dynamics of avoidance and exposure in organizing memory objects, and the power of #LetUsTalk images as a significant component of hashtag memory activism in connecting us to personal memory objects regardless of where and how they have been kept. As Kuhn (1995) discusses, memory objects voice a collective imagination that enables us to find our personal experiences in a couple with other people, remember secrets of images, and generate alternative narratives about the past.

Second fragment: unfolding routinized trauma and resistance habits

As I scrolled through the hashtag contributors and my personal images, memories of wearing the school uniform came flooding back. I noticed that I was scratching my chin and scalp, similar to the time I had to wear a *maqnae* [type of headscarf]⁶ and pulled it off to alleviate the itchiness it caused. The image of schoolgirls reminded me of the challenges of controlling and covering my hair and wearing gloomy school uniforms. Since the sensation of discomfort was palpable, and the hashtag contained frequent images featuring school uniforms, I explored what kind of responses such images would evoke.

Ladan described the long-lasting irritation of wearing school uniforms: 'I have a six-year niece who started school this year. She has curly hair like I do, which makes keeping and fixing a *maqnae* difficult. I become angry every time I see my niece trying to keep her uniform neat and tightening the *maqnae* in photos and videos.' Ladan's response illustrates how the remembering process sparked by #LetUsTalk, then expanded as a result of memory work, conceptualizes the present via the prism of the past. Our accumulated memories reverberate with bodily experiences (Paasonen, 2011), enabling us to replace ourselves and our dear ones with unknown people and envision their feelings both at the time the shutter was clicked and when they appear differently in their digital afterlives (Figure 2).

Besides the distress that re-emerged upon seeing girls in school uniforms, this outfit was also remembered as a means of legitimizing body surveillance, which encompassed not only veiling one's hair but also covering the entire body. The act of removing the hijab, which was discussed in the second example, involves taking off the *maqnae*, and playing with the uniform. Therefore, schools lead us to realize that the hijab extends beyond our hair covering and instead targets our



Figure 2. Post on the first day of school which was shared on February 1, 2022.

bodily autonomy. By addressing the school principal's phone call to her mother regarding removing the hijab while participating in sports, the contributor highlighted how regulations in a gender-segregated place could cause perplexity and contribute to a sense of compulsion (see also Mir Miri, 2022).

The intricacies arising from the rigorous enforcement of bodily norms find their roots in implying the gender segregation policy as one of the core elements of building a unique Islamic society for the state (Shahrokni, 2020). Thus, constant interrogation at schools is in tandem with strengthening Islamic ideology. Given the issue's prevalence, many hashtag contributors share images, discuss the persistent body surveillance, and underscore the entrenched everyday harm. Onwuachi-Willig (2016) outlines how the long history of routine harm can be a condition leading to the emergence of the trauma of the routine narrative from the predictable occurrence. Hence, I consider schools an official confirmation of constant body policing with profound impacts on remembering the traumatic effects of certain life fragments.

Although #LetUsTalk narrates the stories of bodies trained to be docile, it also rekindles resistance experiences. Masi said: 'My mom made me put on a tight-fitting maqnae that covered my chin. But most girls wore looser types at school. I also bought one, hid it in my backpack, and changed it at school. Despite the pressure, I slowly broke several rules, eased the way for my sisters, and helped my mom put away her chador.' Speaking of familial body policing as another cause for the trauma of the routine, Masi hinted at the complexity of body inquisition and resistance. The excerpt highlights Pedwell (2021) theorization about the transformative power of everyday habits in a 'minor key' (p. 14). Drawing from scholarship on everydayness and its role in reshaping affective relationalities (Berlant, 2008; Stewart, 2007), Pedwell (2021) writes, 'habits are not simply individual capacities or modes of behaviour, but rather the product of evolving transactions between organisms and the milieus they inhabit' (p. 87). Accordingly, the resistance habits brought up during our conversations are embedded in everyday life and do not aim to dismantle the structure radically and abruptly, but rather quietly and gradually refuse what it imposes on women's bodies.

Bayat (2010) formulated such practices against compulsory hijab as 'nonmovement,' capable of effecting incremental alternations in the current circumstances. In this vein, resistance habits can change the present context. Here, hashtag memory activism may not shake the dominant discourse,

yet it enters us into a more enduring form of remembrance, in which images do not merely act as prompts but take embodied memories back, and create an ‘affective inhabitation’ that prolongs our connection with the images and deeply engages us with the sensory intensity (Pedwell, 2021). Within this immersive experience, the initial reactions mainly entail traumatic responses; meanwhile, it is through introspection that the revelation of resistance habits emerges. These instances are not necessarily recalled as victory episodes accompanying good feelings, but they carry affective power that cultivates new habits and transformative actions.

Third fragment: emerging archive of affect while remembering a specific occasion

While objects of routine trauma can be recalled as daily insidious harm, some hashtag contributors link their memories to specific occasions. The first two phases of the remembering process show that schools are key places for confronting body policing; the third one marks the Jashn-e Taklif [puberty party]⁷ as an occasion inside the school that is recognized as a life-changing event. In contrast to Mir Miri (2022), who portrays Jashn-e Taklif as an unconventional celebration that is recalled variously, I argue that the afterlife of this emblematic moment exposes nine-year-old girls to aspects of adulthood and new affective experiences. Without going through the details of this event, the online images were repurposed to talk about current feelings and perceptions, involving a process of interpreting memories before publicizing them. The Jashn-e Taklif images serve as mnemonic evidence to express the non-material afterlife of a particular moment (Figure 3).

The third example is an image of the Jashn-e Taklif with text describing how the school principals dealt with students after the puberty party: ‘when we were 9 ... they took away our laughter, covered us in Hijab ... they told us we will be burned in the hell if we don’t wear them.’ This post made me look back at my Jashn-e Taklif images to see whether I could read the happiness on my face. I was biting my lips, and my facial muscles were tensed at seeing myself and others with deadpan faces. I could not recall if anybody had told us ‘no smiling’ or if we had wanted to project the seriousness that was expected of mature women wearing full hijabs, or perhaps both. After a while, I went back to the images; this time, I reminisced about the day as a mirthful gathering of



Figure 3. Post at a Taklif-party which was shared on January 25, 2022.

kids who wanted to make the most of that day. However, in the present, the meanings of memories have changed. Hence, I put this image on our discussion table, and two of my co-rememberers touched on it in their written memories and during the conversations. Farnaz faintly smiled and said:

It's odd that I still recall Jashn-e Taklif as a happy day, perhaps because we all sang together, rejoiced, and got gifts. It was a day when I felt like I had matured and would finally be recognized by others. Soon, I understood that all of this made me an adult who now had to act like a 30-year-old woman. I was told that once you reach puberty and have your period, you are a complete woman, and if you don't follow some rules, you'll be called *bi-haya*. [immodest]

Unlike my initial response, Farnaz saw the image as a good and sweet remembrance of a special day at school, characterizing the non-linearity of the remembering process. Nevertheless, when we both perceived this occasion as a rupture, our experiences converged, and this is where the memory work and #LetUsTalk came together. The hashtag contributors create a space for the type of memory work that simultaneously awakens the archive of affect and engages us with reinterpreting the past in which new meanings of the memories open pathways for rights assertion and political acts. As Jelin (2003) argues, human beings generate and change the social world through involvement in memory work, which is the process of 'symbolic transformation and elaboration of meanings of the past' (p. 5).

In memory reinterpretation, Jashn-e Taklif afterlife has been reminisced as the loss of happiness. In such affective expressions, the hashtag contributors and my co-rememberers did not define themselves as unhappy; instead, they remarked that something made them unhappy and forced them to be someone they did not want to be (Ahmed, 2010). Thus, the brief phrase of 'they took away our laughter' is enough for us to feel how the school's institutional power became one of the causes of imposing unhappiness. This particular occasion can be viewed as one tool for the Islamic Republic to enact the 'politics of sadness'; it involves the strategic management of people's feelings and is used to weaken people's power to challenge sociopolitical structures including disciplinary techniques (Golkar, 2016). By linking unhappiness and adulthood to the Jashn-e Taklif, hashtag contributors assign meaning to this occasion's afterlife, not the particular day, introduce it as a technique of politics of sadness, and motivate us to explore its nuances during the remembrance.

This particular moment resurfaced as the fear of being punished for breaching red lines. The example of the hashtag, addressing the harrowing fate of girls with improper hijabs in hell, initiated a thought-provoking discussion about how school guidance counsellors and families use fear as a tool to discipline girls. Mina's memory is a powerful testament to the traumatic impact of this occasion: 'After Jashn-e Taklif, I heard something that even today shudders me. Our teacher warned us that, from now on, if we didn't wear the hijab properly and pray, Shaytan would poop in our eyes. Back then, I used to wash my face hard to clean the dirt. I'm 31 and still obsessed with cleaning my eyes.' Such intense affective responses are tied with certain memories at school as an affective arrangement to discipline bodies and normalize fear of transgressing boundaries (Wüschner, 2017). Since compulsory hijab is one of the unnegotiable red lines of the Islamic Republic, the state tries to impose its ideology and internalize fear from the early ages by arranging some events under the name of religious ceremonies (Makaremi, 2023). Mina's memory exemplifies how fear can be palpably sensed within the body, particularly while encountering the Jashn-e Taklif image as an object of threat that may not appear violent from an external perspective, but for those who have experienced it firsthand, it has a profound significance and unveils different layers of meaning.

The fear of being punished is also bound up with guilt and shame, and Jashn-e Taklif is an occasion to formalize the system of control and justify penalizing those who violate it. Masi spoke of Jashn-e Taklif's afterlife: 'They wrapped us in chador and placed a heavy responsibility on us after one day. They instilled a feeling of guilt in us because everything we wanted to do was either a minor sin or a major sin . . . This made me wonder if I was actually the bad girl others had portrayed for me.' Within the groups, we could all feel the heaviness of guilt and shame Masi talked about. Under continual body surveillance, distinguishing between guilt and shame is challenging. We were

simultaneously worried about what others would think of our behaviours, which caused us to blame and question ourselves. Although it has been stated that guilt is easier to let go of than shame since it targets our actions, not our existence (Probyn, 2005), I cannot say which one weighs more heavily. Because, in Iran's context, women are regularly accused of guilt for doing or not doing trivial things, which makes them doubt themselves. Also, any action is interpreted in agreement with a religious discourse that views disobeying the rules as a sin, and under Sharia laws, some sins are treated as a crime,⁸ not just a mistake, sometimes resulting in harsh and costly punishments.

We recall and relive moments when others imposed shame and guilt upon us; nevertheless, this is not equated with accepting these feelings for a lifetime. Refusing the guilt and shame ascribed to our actions and state of being, as well as the obligations put on the children's shoulders, can be seen in [Figure 3](#), where the hashtag contributor wrote, 'They lied to us! ... We believed them because we were only 9!' Among my co-rememberers, Negar's tearful recollection of the confiscation of her student card with an excuse for improper hijab by the university guard exemplifies this: 'It was difficult to hear all those threats and denigration, knowing that I had done nothing wrong and was not the person he claimed I was. Alas, I didn't say this aloud.' Although she did not confront the guard directly, her unspoken defiance encapsulates the spirit of adult women who strive to reject feelings of guilt and shame, defacing the idealized portrayal of women in an Islamic society to some degree.

Control mechanisms persistently police women's bodies, and refusal of shame and guilt is an ongoing act that can gradually become a transformative resistance habit. One day, this resistance habit might manifest through contributing to the hashtag, and another day, through memory work engagement. Towards the end of our first group discussion, Mina characterized collective remembrance as a form of resistance when she remarks, 'It's been a while since I've tried to disengage from anything tied to my daily life back in Iran. But now, I feel we have a lot to say; we should speak out, and it's heartening that a trace of our wound can endure.' This collective reconnection to our routinized trauma mitigates the difficulty of engaging with the past, helps us to go beyond our collective wound, and generates ways of transformation. Collective remembering historicizes our wound and does not depict it as an identity marker or fetishize it (Ahmed, 2004). The #LetUsTalk archive of affect not only documents memory objects, mundane memories, and bodily sensations and reactions but can also be perceived as an evolving source of collective resistance habits in a minor key.

Final fragment: practicing revolutionary life

In this article, I have examined #LetUsTalk as a case of hashtag memory activism. While contributors might not label themselves as memory activists, their engagement with the hashtag unveils invisible layers of constant body surveillance. Through the hashtag, diasporic Iranian women forge connections between their personal images and mundane memories, initiating alternative forms of remembrance. Since hashtag memory activism inevitably finds its way to enter the material space (Fridman, 2022), the contributors' practices have involved me in the remembering process and inspired me to invite others to act as my co-rememberers. This study suggests exploring the interplay between hashtag memory activism and memory work as a means to enhance feminist activism. Radicalized introspection initiated by #LetUsTalk and continued through memory work, combined with immersing ourselves in objects of memory, enables us to transcend our collective wound and reinterpret the past and its meaning in the present while avoiding nostalgic reflection (Kuhn, 1995). This approach surpasses the narrative of Iranian women's victimhood in the West, emphasizing a paradigm shift in recognizing the interweaving of unwanted memories and outraged bodies in forming a collective remembering. This type of memory work provides a space to realize how our individual unwanted memories are connected to each other and how the Islamic Republic uses disciplinary techniques to manipulate our affective experiences.

The #LetUsTalk images as memory cues unlock possibilities for imaginative engagement and collective reinterpretation. Through the remembering process, we recognize which

objects and occasions jolt our memories and bodies. The initial reactions after encountering the hashtag come with traumatic responses, reviving memories of bodies carrying fear, guilt, and shame for not meeting others' expectations and Islamic society's red lines. This type of trauma emerges from foreseeable experiences and moments that have not been described as shocking by anyone, though they left unforgettable scars on our bodies. Memories of hashtag contributors and my co-rememberers are not all about the trauma of the routine, as echoes of resistance and refusal can be heard. During the memory work, different feelings, bodily reactions, and resistance habits become evident in connection with the hashtag and shape an archive of affect, which 'is neither pity seeking nor apologetic' (Kyrölä & Huuki, 2021, p. 98).

Although disclosing collective trauma itself is a political act, the archive of affect is shaped by outraged bodies that endure pain to unleash their stories. They simultaneously claim their rights and shed light on the ongoing presence of repression. It is important not to overlook the connection between diasporic Iranian women and those inside the country who are radically resisting the oppressive system. Indeed, the efforts of diasporic Iranian women can bring attention to neglected aspects of obligatory Muslim life.⁹ The archive of affect sparked by hashtag memory activism continues to evolve as outraged bodies open the collective wound. The more wounds that are unveiled, the more the outrage flares up, and new possibilities for revolutionary life are generated. This archive, which embraces our trauma and outrage, is a fragment of the revolutionary life that will persist in one way or another, even if digital platforms disappear.

Notes

1. This letter, 'Don't use an instrument of oppression as a symbol of diversity and inclusion,' was written by Sherif Emil and published on December 20, 2021. It referred to the article titled 'Implementing Social Interventions in Primary Care' and its image that ran on the cover of the November 8, 2021 issue of the Canadian Medical Association Journal. The image showed two young girls reading books together while lying on the ground, one black and the other wearing a headscarf.
2. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/12/14/politics/ilhan-omar-boebers-muslimislamophobia/index.html>
3. During Ramadan 2022 (April – May), the majority of posts address experiencing Ramadan and the compulsion of practicing religious rituals in Iran, not specifically the hijab or body policing. The other time was during the Woman Life Freedom uprising (September 2022).
4. In traditional Iranian architecture, howz is a centrally positioned symmetrical axis pool.
5. A long, mostly black garment covering head to toe.
6. A type of headscarf that is worn in Iran at formal places, such as government organizations, schools, universities, and workplaces. It is meant to cover the head and neck, extending down to the chest.
7. Jashn-e Taklif is a celebration at schools in which nine-year-old girls wear a white or floral chador, recite prayers, and are celebrated by family and friends for reaching the age of 'maturity.' This practice signifies the transition of young girls into adulthood in Iran. When girls reach the age of nine, they can become subject to criminal charges, can be married off with their father's permission, and are obligated to wear the hijab (see Khademian, 2018).
8. It includes improper hijab. According to Article 638 of the Islamic Penal Code, women who do not wear a hijab may be imprisoned from ten days to two months and/or required to pay fines and, in some cases, may be sentenced to whipping with up to 74 lashes. In January 2023, a bill to amend this law was discussed. Following the religious tradition, in which the interpretation of improper hijab is not defined, anyone can be subject to this law.
9. I find it necessary to situate my research in a way that does not reinforce Islamophobia but provides more thoughts on using this discourse to understand people who have experienced compulsory aspects of Muslim life. This is far away from those who choose to wear hijabs or practice Islam.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express gratitude to her supervisors, Susanna Paasonen and Kata Kyrölä, for their guidance and valuable feedback throughout the research process, as well as the participants of the Media Studies research seminar at the University of Turku. Special thanks are also extended to those who generously shared their memories, making this study possible.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Kone Foundation under Grant [202012801].

Notes on contributor

Golnar Gishnizjani is a Ph.D. researcher in Media Studies at the University of Turku, Finland. Her doctoral project examines Iranian women's digital activism engaging with feminist theory, affect inquiry, and media studies scholarship.

ORCID

Golnar Gishnizjani  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5556-5314>

References

- Ahmed, S. (2004). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Duke University Press.
- Bayat, A. (2010). *Life as politics: How ordinary people change the middle east* (2nd ed.). Stanford University Press.
- Behrouzan, O. (2016). *Prozak diaries: Psychiatry and generational memory in Iran*. Stanford University Press.
- Berlant, L. (2008). *The female complaint: The unfinished business of sentimentality in American culture*. Duke University Press.
- Cvetkovic, A. (2003). *An archive of feelings*. Duke University Press.
- Cvetkovich, A. (2007). Public feelings. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106(3), 459–468. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2007-004>
- Doostdar, A. (2004). The vulgar spirit of blogging: On language, culture, and power in Persian weblogistan. *American Anthropologist*, 106(4), 651–662. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2004.106.4.651>
- Eyerman, R. (2015). *Is this America? Katrina as cultural trauma*. University of Texas Press.
- Fridman, O. (2022). *Memory activism and digital practices after conflict: Unwanted memories*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Golkar, S. (2016). Manipulated society. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 29(2), 135–155. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-015-9208-0>
- Gutman, Y., & Wüstenberg, J. (2021). Challenging the meaning of the past from below: A typology for comparative research on memory activists. *Memory Studies*, 15(5), 1070–1086. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980211044696>
- Haug, F. (Ed.). (1987). *Female sexualization: A collective work of memory*. Verso.
- Haug, F. (2008). Memory work. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 23(58), 537–541. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164640802433498>
- Jelin, E. (2003). *State repression and the labors of memory (contradictions of modernity)*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Keightley, E., & Pickering, M. (2012). *The mnemonic imagination: Remembering as creative practice*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Khademian, Y. (2018). *Iranian feminist voices reclaiming narratives through Taklif: Ideas of femininity*. The McGill Daily. Retrieved November 20, 2022, from <https://www.mcgilldaily.com/2018/11/iranian-feminist-voices/>
- Kuhn, A. (1995). *Family secrets : Acts of memory and imagination*. Verso.
- Kuhn, A. (2010). Memory texts and memory work: Performances of memory in and with visual media. *Memory Studies*, 3(4), 298–313. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698010370034>
- Kyrölä, K. (2015). Toward a contextual pedagogy of pain trigger warnings and the value of sometimes feeling really, really bad. *Lambda Nordica: Nordic Journal on LGBTQ Studies*, 20(1), 131–144.

- Kyrölä, K., & Huuki, T. (2021). Re-imagining a queer Indigenous past: Affective archives and minor gestures in the Sámi documentary Sparrooabbán. *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, 60(5), 75–98. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2021.0020>
- Makaremi, C. (2023, June, 29). *Crossing the red lines*. Society for Cultural Anthropology.
- Malek, A. (2021). Clickbait orientalism and vintage Iranian snapshots. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24(2), 266–289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920957348>
- Memou, A. (2013). *Photography and social movements*. Manchester University Press.
- Merrill, S. (2020). Following the woman with the handbag: Mnemonic context collapse and the anti-fascist activist appropriation of an iconic historical photograph. In S. Merrill, E. Keightley, & P. Daphi (Eds.), *Social movements, cultural memory and digital media mobilising mediated remembrance* (pp. 111–139). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mir Miri, H. (2022). *Diasporic body-memory politics: Sexualized public gender-role surveillance in post-revolutionary and post-war Iran* [Master's thesis]. University of Saskatchewan. University of Saskatchewan eTheses Repository. <https://harvest.usask.ca/handle/10388/14095>
- Moreno Figueroa, M. G. (2008). Looking emotionally: Photography, racism and intimacy in research. *History of the Human Sciences*, 21(4), 68–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695108095512>
- Naghbi, N. (2016). *Women write Iran: Nostalgia and human rights from the diaspora*. University of Minnesota.
- Nasirpour, S. (2016). Iranian women and the politics of diasporic websites in the digital age. *Anthropology of the Middle East*, 11(2), 76–90. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ame.2016.110206>
- Onwuachi-Willig, A. (2016). The trauma of the routine: Lessons on cultural trauma from the Emmett till verdict. *Sociological Theory*, 34(4), 335–357. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275116679864>
- Paasonen, S. (2011). *Carnal resonance affect and online pornography*. MIT Press.
- Pedwell, C. (2021). *Revolutionary routines the habits of social transformation*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Probyn, E. (2005). *Blush faces of shame*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Rahbari, L. (2021). When gender turns right: Racializing Islam and femonationalism in online political discourses in Belgium. *Contemporary Politics*, 27(1), 41–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2020.1813950>
- Rahimi, B. (2003). Cyberdissent: The internet in revolutionary Iran. *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 7(3). <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2003/issue3/rahimi.pdf>
- Saeidi, S. (2022). A sovereign body a visceral view on muslim women's perpetual imagination with hijab. In P. Y. Arafath & G. Arunima (Eds.), *The hijab Islam, women and the politics of clothing*. Simon and Schuster.
- Shahrokni, N. (2020). *Women in place: The politics of gender segregation in Iran* (1st ed.). University of California Press.
- Shakhsari, S. (2020). *Politics of rightful killing. Civil society, gender, and sexuality in weblogistan*. Duke University Press.
- Smit, R. (2020). Connective memory work on justice for mike brown. In S. Merrill, E. Keightley, & P. Daphi (Eds.), *Social movements, cultural memory and digital media : Mobilising mediated remembrance* (pp. 85–108). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stewart, K. (2007). *Ordinary affects*. Duke University Press.
- Tafakori, S. (2021). Digital feminism beyond nativism and empire: Affective territories of recognition and competing claims to suffering in Iranian women's campaigns. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 47(1), 47–80. <https://doi.org/10.1086/715649>
- Van Dijck, J. (2007). *Cultural memory in the present*. Stanford University Press.
- Wüschner, P. (2017). Shame, guilt, and punishment. *Foucault Studies*, 23, 86–107. <https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.v0i0.5343>