

Unseen Weights: The Mental and Emotional Toll of Womanhood

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"I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ship" – Louisa May Alcott

Preface

From the moment we are born, our lives are shaped by perceptions tied to gender. We grow up under layers of expectations and judgments, encountering experiences we didn't ask for but inevitably face simply because we are women. When I first tried to put my gendered experiences into words, I felt overwhelmed, as if these biases were woven into every aspect of life, often so subtly they seemed almost invisible, until they weren't. In this reflection, I explore pivotal moments that opened my eyes to how these biases affect even the smallest details of daily life, revealing a deeper, more nuanced reality that is often overlooked. Through these moments, I hope to shed light on the complexities of navigating a world that sees women primarily through the lens of our gender.

Everyday Streets, Everyday Battles

At twelve years old, I finally earned a slice of independence: walking the five minutes between school and home alone. But it came with rules. My mother's warnings were sharp and clear: *Watch out for men who follow, never slow down, and stay alert.* I knew why – she'd seen the world and wanted to spare me from it. But I had already felt the heat of leering eyes even when I wasn't alone. Sometimes, my elder brother or the housekeeper would take extra turns, a subtle attempt to dodge men who seemed glued to our path. Now, as I walked alone down the streets, the stares and comments – *'to'ebnine'* and *'jamelik'* – were constant. Even when fully covered, their eyes seemed to undress me, and I'd find myself checking that my clothes were in place. I'd grown used to these passing remarks; they didn't feel serious, just a hum in the background.

It wasn't long before something happened that couldn't be shrugged off so easily. One afternoon, as I left school, a car slowed down beside me. The man behind the wheel, who looked like he was in his thirties, leaned toward the open window. His voice was too casual, almost practiced.

"Are you Amal?" he asked, naming me as if we were old friends.
"Your mom ordered an Uber for you."

I froze, my mind racing. "My mom wouldn't do that," I managed to say, my voice flat. He didn't argue, just nodded and drove away as if he hadn't just tried to convince a twelve-year-old to get in his car. I went home and told my mother casually that some guy had tried to pick me up. *No big deal*, I thought.

But my mother didn't think so. Her face blanched, and she was frantic. She called the school, asked them to look at the cameras, and insisted I have someone walk with me for a few days. When she told me there was no footage of him, no trace of that car, something about her worry made me pause. *He could have tried harder. He could have gotten what he wanted*, she said. But I pushed it aside. *Nothing happened, I'm fine*, I told myself, burying the unease and focusing on the fact that I'd kept walking, on the fact that I didn't enter the car.

By the time I was twenty-one, danger was part of my daily landscape. Walking to campus, I'd grown numb to men who slowed down, catcalling or making crude comments, the invisible barrier between us as fragile as the quickening of my steps. One day, a man on a motorcycle followed me for blocks, laughing and calling out as I wove through side streets, knowing he'd lose interest sooner or later.

When one of my guy friends found out, he asked, "Doesn't that scare you?"

I shrugged, almost amused. "I knew he'd get bored eventually."

We laughed it off, my girlfriends and I, almost in solidarity with each other, as if minimizing it made it sting less. *It's just how men are*, we told ourselves. *This is our reality*.

Not Just a Glance, Not Just a Comment

Under the warm sun at the beach one day, I felt a quiet kind of confidence settling in, a sensation I wasn't used to. The salt air hung thick, mingling with the scent of sunscreen and damp towels, and the steady sound of people's laughter and chatter filled the space around us. For once, I'd chosen not to cover up after leaving the pool. I liked my bathing suit; I felt comfortable without pulling on the layers my mom always urged me to wear. Just this one small act of defiance, choosing not to slip on a dress, felt oddly freeing.

We headed over to the dessert stand, which was just a few steps from where we'd spread out on the sand. My friends and I were still wet from the water, our hair dripping onto our shoulders as we waited, laughing and talking. I was half-aware of my own ease, how it felt to sit without adjusting or rearranging myself, to just exist in my own skin, soft and relaxed.

But then, suddenly, I heard someone calling me.

The voice, low and rough, belonged to the man working at the dessert stand. I'd seen him earlier, noticed how he'd eyed my partner at the time with a mixture of disdain and something else, some hostile curiosity, a challenge barely masked by his tone. I was already wary of him. Now, he called me over, his tone one of false concern. He nodded toward a corner, gesturing for me to come closer, his face twisted into something that almost looked like a smirk.

I went, not knowing what to expect, the brief flicker of unease stirring but quickly swallowed. Then he leaned close, too close, his gaze flicking to my chest, and said, "Your... your chest is out."

He pointed subtly to two women off to the side, their eyes fixed on me, laughing.

"They asked me to tell you because they were too shy."

He stared at me, a dark gleam in his eyes that turned my stomach. I froze, confusion spiraling in my mind. I knew my suit was secure – I had even worn protective pads – and none of my friends, right beside me the entire time, had noticed a thing. Still, the world seemed to stutter and stop. In that moment, I was not in my own body. I could not even find the words.

I remember nodding, whispering, “Okay.”

His face, that smirk, the women’s laughter in the background, faint but sharp, everything blurred, smeared around the edges. I stumbled back to my seat, but the air felt too thick, pressing down on me, as if I were naked, exposed to the entire world. Every glance felt like a claw; every sound amplified into a jeer.

I sank into my seat, wrapped my arms around myself, but the feeling did not go away. I could hear the surf crashing behind us, loud and unrelenting, but it felt so far away. My friend’s voice was next to me, angry and protective. She stormed over to him, her words hot and quick, but he just laughed her off, saying he was only trying to help. His laughter rang in my ears, low and smug, echoing the hollow laughter of those two women, still casting sidelong glances in my direction.

My friends wrapped their arms around me, trying to soothe me, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was still out there, fully exposed, seen in a way I didn’t want to be. No amount of layers, no amount of towels or reassurances could make me feel safe. I was raw, small, laid bare in a way that turned my own skin into a stranger’s – something vulnerable, something shameful.

When I finally got home, my friend dropped me off, and for those two short minutes it took to get to the door, I could feel him there. Every step echoed with the weight of his gaze, every breath thick with the memory of his words. I could feel the wind heavy with it, sticky and uncomfortable, pressing on me like hands I couldn’t shake off.

Later, I told my mom. Her face darkened, softened, and then I saw her own memory flare in her eyes. She told me she’d had moments just like mine, moments that made her warn me all those years to cover up, to protect myself from what she called “the gaze,” the look that shouldn’t be there in the first place.

“Why didn’t you say something, file a complaint?” she asked.

All I could manage was, “It’s fine... it’s over.”

But it wasn’t. The memory sticks to me, vivid as that first day, leaving me with anger that churns, pulsing in the spaces between words and moments. I see myself back in that instant, over and over, sometimes screaming, sometimes shoving him back, telling the two women, *is this your way of supporting other women?* I picture myself walking over to him, shaking with fire, telling him, *you do not get to objectify me. You do not get to hold this power.* Because none of it was okay. None of it was just “fine.”

Every catcall I’d shrugged off, every stare that followed me down the street – no longer small, not just part of the background noise. It’s all loud now, all shouting with the message that just because something’s common doesn’t make it right. You don’t get to treat me like this. You don’t get to follow me down the street, to leer and toss comments from your motorcycle, thinking you can just move on like nothing happened. Because that

day, I realized that it doesn't just fade. It becomes a part of you, of your skin, until it's not the layers that make you safe but the courage to look them back in the eye, to refuse to give up even a fragment of your own self.

Living Through Others' Eyes

When I think back to those days, it's like I'm watching someone else, a younger me, still discovering, not yet aware of how others' eyes could define her so sharply. I was just a kid, eleven, maybe twelve, when the comments started. Boys would toss careless words my way, pinning their judgment on parts of me I hadn't even noticed. I hadn't thought of my arms as anything but my arms, my face as anything but my face. But suddenly, I was hearing words like "*disgusting*" and "*freakish*" hurled at my skin. There was a moustache, they told me, hair on my arms I hadn't even thought to see. I didn't know the right things to say back then, only that I was ashamed of something I hadn't known was even there.

So, I went to my mother.

"I want to take it off," I told her, the words tasting strange in my mouth, as if I were trying on someone else's voice. I remember her quiet hesitation, the way she looked at me with a mix of surprise and sadness, as though I'd come to her too soon with this strange request. She hadn't been the one to teach me about "beauty" or tell me to pick up the razor. Instead, it was those boys and their passing comments, the ones they forgot as soon as they said them, but which I couldn't seem to let go of. They were light, fleeting remarks to them; to me, they were stones dropped into the well of my self-worth, each comment sinking deeper and deeper, echoing louder than I knew words could.

And so, from there, the cycle began. I told myself that I did all these things for myself –shaving, plucking, choosing clothes that hid as much as they showed. I told myself it was all in the name of self-care, or comfort, or even beauty, as if I could own it, as if I could make it my own choice. But the truth was, it wasn't just for me. It was for the quiet, pressing thought of being seen. Being seen, and then judged. *I hope they won't notice I haven't shaved. I feel like this shirt shows my belly fat, and I have to present in front of the class today.* It was easier to take these small steps of caution than to leave myself open to those comments, those small, dismissive glances.

As I grew older, I realized it didn't stop at my skin or my hair. It wasn't only about what I wore, or the lines that grew dark on my skin if I left them untended. There were the endless other small reminders, whispered in the same careless tone: *Why do you laugh like that? It's too loud. Why are you standing like that? Why are you so... anything?* The unspoken message was always the same: you are here for us, we are the mirror in which you must see yourself, and we will let you know if we approve. I thought I knew my worth, and I told myself again and again that I wasn't here to be anyone's object, that I wasn't here to please anyone but myself. But still, it's difficult to shut out that sound, those voices.

And then, I turned sixteen. A moment of rebellion, of purpose. I'd always worn my hair long, but this time, I cut it short. Really short. Not just for a trim or a change, but for a reason that meant something to me: a donation, a small act of dedication to the breast cancer cause. It was my own gift, a decision I made as a small, fierce way to support the feminist club I'd joined, to stand with something I believed in. I felt lighter, freer, but then I saw the looks: the worried glances, the polite, careful phrases: *Oh, it's... different.*

"I know it was for donations," my crush at the time said, while he pulled a small smile that wasn't quite kind. "But I'm glad it's growing back. Don't ever do that again."

I can still feel the sting of it, the way it pulled me back to those first, hesitant years of feeling noticed, of being weighed in their eyes. It seemed no matter what I did, no matter how much I tried to make these choices for myself, there was always this underlying sense of *doing it for them*, for the quiet comfort of having nothing left for them to judge. I wanted to live my life untouched by their glances, wanted to see myself through my own gaze, but somehow, there was always this echo of their words, this faint pull toward validation, the thought that maybe if they had nothing left to say, it meant they might finally just let me be.

These aren't grand, sweeping moments. They're small, whispered, quiet things, too easy for others to overlook, but they're there, heavy with the weight of something larger. And sometimes, I wonder: when will these small fragments no longer feel so important? When will I feel that I am enough just as I am, that I am not here for their passing glances, not here to be validated, or watched, or owned?

The Legacy of Strength

As I sit with my mom, the afternoon sun spilling through the windows, casting long shadows on the floor, I listen, captivated by her story.

"Your grandmother was a force," she says, her voice reverent. I can see my grandma in flashes: a woman who cut her hair short, dressed in sharp suits, who let her body hair grow, defying what was expected of her.

"She even used to make me keep mine," my mom says, laughing lightly, though her eyes hold a sadness.

Until one day, a friend scolded her, saying, "This isn't about what you're going through anymore; it's about cleanliness."

I picture my grandmother's determination, her need to shape herself into something bolder, sharper, as if every inch of her armor might push her forward in a world stacked against her. My admiration for her grows with each story. When my grandfather died, my mom was just four years old, and my grandmother, barely in her thirties, was pregnant with her fourth child. She managed everything alone – running a household, raising children, working for the UN, overseeing an entire orphanage. I can almost feel the weight of her responsibilities, the papers to file, the bills to pay, the children to feed, and the meetings to attend.

"Your grandmother was undermined just for being a woman," my mom tells me, and the words feel heavy, like stones dropped into still water.

The image shifts to her, grief-stricken, still clad in mourning black, barely days after my grandfather's funeral. Family members visited, offering empty condolences, while one of them, someone she trusted, used her rawness, her lack of focus, to trick her into signing away a large part of the wealth she should have inherited. When she finally realized, she tried to fight it, but they dismissed her, mocked her attempts as if she didn't have the

intelligence or authority to claim what was rightfully hers. Only when she asked her brother to step in did they take her seriously. As my mother recounts these stories, I picture my grandmother visiting the lands that my grandfather once managed. She is alone but holds her head high, surveying her new responsibilities. Strangers would leer, undermining her intelligence, dismissing her as silly or out of place, as if she could be anything but competent. Yet, she moves forward, only sometimes bringing a man or, as my mother said, *performing herself* as a man to demand respect. The scent of the fields, rich with earth and freshly turned soil, fills my mind as I imagine her, undeterred.

I look at my mom, absorbing it all, her voice merging with my own memories. The kitchen, my first internship, a place that has seemed magical to me since I was nine. I love the smoky air, the scent of herbs and spices mingling together, the clang of pots and the hiss of sizzling oil. Cooking has always felt like creation, like magic I can hold in my hands. But as I had walked into that resort kitchen for the first time, a room buzzing with activity, heat pressing down from all sides, I noticed I was the only girl. I tried to ignore it, reminding myself that I was there for work. And then, the words came out.

A co-worker, his voice barely audible over the clatter and hum of the kitchen, said with a smirk, "What are you doing here? This isn't a woman's job."

The words hit like a slap, leaving an ache in my chest. My classmate, a boy, chuckled.

"Yeah, you have to stay standing all day in the smoke and heat, carry heavy pots, it's exhausting," he said.

"This is men's work."

Men's work. I stood there, feeling a slow burn build inside me. This "men's work" was what I loved, what I'd wanted for years. And yet, in that moment, all the noise in the kitchen fell silent, and all I could hear were those words. *You don't belong here.* I felt small, shrinking under the weight of their laughter, like a secret about myself had been exposed, one I hadn't even known was there.

When I got home that night, my mom was waiting up for me. I told her about it, every detail. She looked at me, her face softening with a kind of fierce pride.

"I always wanted you to feel like you could do anything," she said quietly. "Your grandmother taught me that."

Her words filled me with a quiet resolve. I remembered my grandmother, her unyielding determination, the way she had pushed forward despite it all, never letting them see her hesitate. I could almost see her in the kitchen with me, the ghost of her strength beside me, her hands steady on my shoulders, saying, *don't let them stop you.*

I want every woman to feel this, to stand there, in the heat, in the smoke, carrying the weight of pots, of prejudices, of centuries of people saying *this isn't for you*, and to know that it is. To feel that strength, born of defiance, and realize, yes, I belong here. Because, I think, looking at my mom, we are stronger than they will ever understand.

Stories That Ignite Strength and Defiance

As I think back on each of these moments, they blend together like pieces of a puzzle, each one shaping the way I see myself and the world around me. I realize now that

these encounters weren't isolated; they were part of a larger story, a silent schooling in how society expects me to be, to fit, to conform.

It took years to understand that I don't owe anyone my obedience to these unwritten rules, that I'm allowed to stand in defiance, just like my grandmother did, even if it means facing resistance. I may not yet have the strength she had, or the wisdom to face down every expectation with unshakeable resolve, but I know now that the power lies within me, just as it lay within her. Each step, each defiant moment, brings me closer to living in my own skin, to being defined by my own gaze rather than theirs.

I used to believe that strength was about silence – shrugging off every comment, every judgment, every catcall without letting it touch me. But I see now that strength is also about facing these moments, acknowledging their impact, and then choosing to step forward anyway, claiming the space I inhabit as my own. In those quiet, unnoticed moments, I find the strength to rewrite the narrative. And perhaps, with each step I take, each choice to rise above their words, I bring myself closer to a life shaped not by their gaze but by my own.

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