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Between coping and resistance: Exploring how Iranian immigrant women respond to experiences of workplace oppression

This paper explores how highly-educated Iranian immigrants in the US respond to workplace oppression and, in doing so, bridges the literature on coping and feminist resistance. By investigating how responses go beyond traditional coping strategies, this study highlights how these women not only cope with but actively challenge systemic oppression. Utilizing qualitative interviews, this research offers insights into a range of responses, from doubling efforts as coping mechanisms to building critical consciousness as a form of resistance. The findings reveal the complexity of responses, including hybrid strategies such as embracing anger, exercising voice, and leveraging support and forging subversive coalitions. This study challenges the conventional understanding of coping as merely adaptive and individualistic, showing how it can interplay with active resistance strategies. By integrating coping and resistance frameworks, the research provides a more nuanced understanding of immigrant women's agency and highlights the need for more intersectional approaches in gender and oppression studies. This contributes to re-evaluating theoretical frameworks around responses to/navigating oppression.

Keywords: workplace oppression, immigrant women, coping mechanisms, feminist resistance

Introduction:

Motivated by the desire for better opportunities and an enhanced quality of life, immigrant women embark on journeys that take them across different parts of the world (Pio *et al.*, 2014). Their path is frequently affected by the glaring manifestation of oppression, which results from the intersection of their gender, racial, and immigration status, among others (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2015; Collins *et al.*, 2021; Davis, 1983; Hooks, 2014). Recent data underscores the magnitude of these challenges: in the U.S., for example, immigrant women

earn only 58.4 cents for every dollar earned by U.S. born men, and 29% of college-educated immigrant women work in low-skilled jobs despite their qualifications, a rate nearly three times higher than their host country counterparts(MPI, 2022). This complexity is particularly evident in the case of highly educated immigrant women, who must navigate the tension between their professional expertise and systemic devaluation of their credentials. Recent data shows that 64% of immigrant women with advanced degrees report experiencing "credential discounting," where their foreign qualifications are systematically devalued (MPI, 2023).

While existing research has examined either coping mechanisms or resistance strategies, the reality of how these women navigate workplace challenges defies this simple binary. Their responses often serve multiple purposes simultaneously, functioning as both survival strategies and catalysts for change. Experiences of oppression elicit varied responses, ranging from conformity and self-silencing to avoid further oppression to advocacy for rights and pushing for systemic change (Phillips *et al.*, 2015). How marginalized groups respond to workplace oppression—often referred to as coping—has received significant attention in the organizational literature (Murray *et al.*, 2017; Carver *et al.*, 1989; Miller and Kaiser, 2001). Research has explored coping mechanisms generally conceptualized as problem-focused, emotion-focused, or community-focused (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004). While these strategies can enhance awareness and inspire collective action, they often fail to address the power structures that limit individual agency (Phillips *et al.*, 2015).

On the other hand, literature on feminist resistance (Hooks, 2015; Ahmed, 2002) has highlighted how women have historically employed diverse strategies to resist oppression and assert their agency (Butler, 2009; Hooks, 2015; Ahmed, 2002). The concept of intersectionality, developed by Crenshaw (1991) and Collins (2000), has further influenced how feminist resistance is understood and enacted, in particular by multiply marginalized individuals. These scholars emphasize resistance as both individual and collective action, ranging from overt

challenges to subtle acts of subversion in everyday practices. Their work reveals how women's resistance often operates through informal networks, strategic uses of knowledge and expertise, and the creation of alternative spaces where dominant power structures can be questioned and reimagined.

Integrating insights from both coping and resistance literatures, this research investigates how professional Iranian immigrant women in the US respond to workplace oppression beyond conventional understandings of coping. The case of Iranian women in the U.S. is particularly significant because it illuminates how geopolitical tensions and cultural dynamics intersect with workplace experiences, creating unique patterns of both vulnerability and resistance. Their strategies for navigating these challenges offer valuable insights for understanding how marginalized professionals can simultaneously adapt to and challenge oppressive systems.

Understanding how immigrant women simultaneously cope with and resist workplace oppression is crucial for three reasons. First, it challenges the artificial separation between coping and resistance in existing literature, offering a more nuanced theoretical framework that better reflects the complexity of marginalized groups' experiences. Second, it provides practical insights for organizations striving to support an increasingly diverse workforce, revealing how conventional diversity initiatives may fail to address the sophisticated ways immigrant women navigate workplace challenges. Third, it contributes to broader discussions about organizational change by showing how individual responses to oppression can serve as catalysts for systemic transformation.

This study advances both theoretical understanding and practical organizational change efforts through three significant contributions. First, by reconceptualizing the relationship between coping and resistance, it reveals a sophisticated continuum where responses

simultaneously serve adaptive and transformative purposes, challenging prevailing assumptions about immigrant women as only passive victims of workplace oppression or active agents of resistance. Second, the findings extend intersectionality theory by demonstrating how professional immigrant women's responses to oppression are shaped not only by their intersecting identities, but also by temporal and spatial dimensions that span both home and host countries. Third, by examining Iranian women's experiences, we illuminate how geopolitical tensions and cultural dynamics create unique patterns of workplace oppression and resistance, contributing to broader discussions about how global political contexts shape local organizational experiences. These theoretical advances have crucial practical implications for organizations seeking to move beyond simple inclusion policies or formal complaint mechanisms. Instead, organizations must recognize and support the sophisticated ways immigrant women exercise agency while navigating structural constraints. As workplaces become increasingly global and diverse, understanding these complex dynamics is essential for creating truly equitable organizations that can harness the full potential of their immigrant professional workforce.

Literature:

Immigrant women and workplace oppression:

Research examining workplace oppression reveals how complex intersecting layers of oppression create distinct workplace barriers for immigrant women professionals (Blell et al., 2023). Workplace oppression, defined as systematic discrimination that specifically targets or disproportionately impacts certain groups beyond individual discrimination (Williams et al., 2003), manifests through both overt discrimination and subtle embedded systematic practices. Distinct challenges faced by immigrant women include discriminatory hiring practices, inequitable compensation practices, and lack of professional advancement. (Liu, 2022; Blell et

al., 2023). Wage data highlights stark disparities: immigrant women's earnings lag 41.6% behind U.S.-born men, more than double the 17% gap faced by native-born women with 46% reporting workplace discrimination during the pandemic compared to 32% of native-born women (IWPR, 2023). Among college-educated immigrant women, 29% work in low-skilled jobs despite their qualifications, highlighting how oppression systematically devalues their professional capabilities (MPI, 2022).

Professional immigrant women occupy a unique position - often privileged through education and skills yet marginalized through gender, ethnicity, and immigration status . This complexity manifests particularly clearly among Iranian women professionals, who deploy cultural and educational resources while confronting systematic devaluation of their capabilities (Rashidian et al., 2013). Their experiences illuminate how resistance operates through both overt challenges to oppressive systems and subtle deployment of professional expertise (Mahdi, 2014). For Iranian women specifically, navigating workplace oppression involves simultaneous negotiation of gender expectations, cultural adaptation, and professional identity (Mahdi, 2014; Rashidian et al., 2013). Ghorashi's (2003) comparative study of Iranian women exiles illuminates how these power dynamics operate differently across national contexts, shaping both experiences of oppression and possibilities for resistance.

Traditional frameworks examining responses to oppression have often separated coping strategies from resistance. However, studies of Middle Eastern immigrant women reveal a more complex reality where survival strategies and resistance frequently intertwine (Gilanshah, 2011; McConatha et al., 2001). Liu's (2019) research on migrant wives demonstrates how seemingly individual coping actions can constitute forms of collective resistance, while her analysis of institutional frameworks reveals how immigrant women simultaneously navigate and challenge gendered systems (Liu, 2022).

Studies from South Africa to Qatar highlight the compounded difficulties immigrant women face, such as domestic violence, xenophobia, language barriers, unemployment, and the perception of foreignness intersecting with gender (Rodriguez and Scurry, 2019). This comprehensive body of research underscores the multifaceted challenges faced by immigrant women in global labor markets, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to dismantle barriers hindering their full integration. While studies document their experiences of workplace oppression, there is less focus on how they navigate or respond to it (De Castro *et al.*, 2006). To address this gap, I next engage with extant research on coping with oppression.

Diverse Coping Mechanisms Against Oppression:

Various coping mechanisms serve as protective behaviors against psychological harm caused by oppressive systems within organizational settings (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Miller and Kaiser, 2001). Coping is typically categorized into emotion-focused, problem-focused, or community-focused strategies (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004). Problem-focused coping involves taking direct action to resolve oppression-related issues, such as making compensatory efforts or seeking empowerment (Parsons, 2001). Emotion-focused strategies, like denial and disengagement, aim to manage emotional distress by mentally distancing oneself from oppressive realities (Crosby, 2017/1984). Social coping mechanisms, such as seeking social support and collective identification, involve finding solace and strength through shared experiences (Au *et al.*, 2013).

Research on immigrant women highlights diverse coping strategies tailored to navigate workplace oppression. While traditional approaches focus on individual psychological adaptation, recent studies of Iranian immigrant women reveal how coping strategies often serve multiple purposes (McConatha et al., 2001). As Ghorashi (2003) demonstrates, these women develop sophisticated responses that combine emotional management with professional

strategy. Their coping mechanisms reflect both their professional status and cultural background, often drawing on educational resources and transnational experiences (Mahdi, 2014).

Cohen (1991) explores how live-in domestic workers, particularly women of color in white households, adapt through community resources, workplace adjustments, and cognitive strategies. While coping mechanisms typically aim to alleviate immediate distress, there is a growing need to understand how women can resist workplace oppression more effectively, challenging oppressive systems rather than solely mitigating negative feelings.

While certainly important for understanding the full extent of how people experience oppression, a critique of the dominant research on coping is that it is limited to a focus on the alleviation of 'symptoms', still maintaining the individual as the central figure, versus seeking to problematize the systems or structures that (re)produce oppression which might ultimately encourage adaptation to existing systems rather than questioning/challenging them (Philips *et al.*, 2015). On the other hand, literature on feminist resistance centers the role of systems of oppression and resisting them, and I turn to this next.

Feminist Resistance and Organizational Change:

Literature on feminist resistance (Hooks, 2015; Ahmed, 2002) has highlighted how women have historically employed diverse strategies to resist oppression and assert their agency (Butler, 2009; Hooks, 2015; Ahmed, 2002). In the context of work and organizations, feminist resistance explores how women navigate and subvert gendered power dynamics, intersecting with aspects of professional life (Lilja and Jahnsson, 2018; Lilja and Vinthagen, 2018).

Recent work on immigrant women's resistance highlights how professional credentials and cultural capital become tools for challenging workplace oppression (Liu, 2019). Studies of

Iranian immigrant women demonstrate how they leverage their educational backgrounds and professional expertise to resist marginalization while maintaining professional identities (Rashidian et al., 2013). This resistance takes various forms, from subtle workplace negotiations to more overt challenges of discriminatory practices (Gilanshah, 2011). Blell et al. (2023) further illustrate how immigrant women in academia develop sophisticated resistance strategies that combine professional expertise with cultural knowledge.

The concept of intersectionality, developed by Crenshaw (1991), has further influenced how feminist resistance is understood and enacted, particularly by multiply marginalized individuals. For Iranian immigrant women specifically, resistance often involves navigating complex cultural expectations while challenging workplace hierarchies (Mahdi, 2014; Ghorashi, 2003). While the resistance literature illuminates various ways immigrant women may resist oppressive systems, a significant gap exists in understanding how coping and resistance interact, particularly their contextual conditions and relational dynamics. To bridge this gap, this study draws conceptually on both the coping and feminist resistance literatures to explore how professional Iranian immigrant women in the US develop sophisticated strategies that simultaneously help them navigate and challenge workplace oppression, revealing the complex interplay between individual adaptation and systemic change.

Methodology:

Case Selection Justification:

Iranian immigrant women in the US represent a particularly compelling case for studying workplace oppression responses for several distinct reasons. First, they occupy a unique intersectional position that differs from other immigrant groups previously studied. Unlike many immigrant populations who arrive with often low, relative to the US generation

Iranian immigrants to the US are among the most highly educated - with over 60% holding bachelor's degrees or higher compared to 28% of the general US population (Migration Policy Institute, 2019). Even more striking, 31% of Iranian-Americans hold a master's degree or doctorate, three times the national average (Iranian Studies Group at MIT, 2022). This high educational attainment, combined with their status as women from a Muslim-majority country, creates a distinctive dynamic where they often face simultaneous privilege (through education and professional credentials) and marginalization (through gender, ethnicity, and religion).

Second, the geopolitical tensions between the US and Iran create additional layers of complexity not present for most other immigrant groups. Iranian women face unique forms of discrimination stemming from post-9/11 Islamophobia despite Iran not being an Arab country, as well as specific prejudices related to US-Iran political conflicts. According to recent studies, 76% of Iranian-Americans report experiencing discrimination or unfair treatment because of their ethnicity or country of origin (PAAIA, 2023). This context creates distinctive challenges in workplace integration and professional advancement that differ from those faced by immigrants from countries with less contentious relationships with the US. The ongoing sanctions against Iran also affect their ability to maintain professional credentials, transfer qualifications, and maintain connections with professional networks in their home country - challenges unique to this population.

Third, Iranian women's experiences of gender dynamics in their home country, where they face strict religious and cultural restrictions, followed by migration to the US with its different gender norms, provides unique insights into how prior experiences of oppression shape responses to workplace discrimination in the host country. Unlike immigrants from countries with less oppressive gender regimes, Iranian women must navigate a dramatic shift in gender expectations while simultaneously managing professional integration. Recent studies

indicate that 82% of professional Iranian women report having to actively "unlearn" previous adaptive behaviors developed in Iran while developing new strategies for the US workplace context (Mahdi, 2021). This transition from one system of gender relations to another offers important theoretical insights into how women develop and adapt their coping and resistance strategies.

Finally, while extensive research exists on immigrant women's workplace experiences from Latin America, East Asia, and South Asia, Iranian women relatively understudied despite their growing presence in professional workplaces. The Iranian-American population has grown by 42% since 2000, with women making up 58% of this growth (US Census Bureau, 2020). Their experiences illuminate important gaps in our understanding of how highly educated immigrant women from Middle Eastern backgrounds navigate workplace oppression in Western contexts. The timing of Iranian immigration waves - primarily post-1979 Revolution - also provides insights into how different generations within the same immigrant group develop varying strategies for workplace navigation.

These distinctive characteristics make Iranian immigrant women an ideal case for examining how intersecting identities shape workplace experiences and responses to oppression. Their case helps advance theoretical understanding of how professional immigrant women develop sophisticated strategies that blend coping and resistance when navigating complex systems of power and privilege. Furthermore, studying this population contributes to broader discussions about how organizations can better support highly skilled immigrant professionals while addressing systemic barriers to their full workplace integration.

Sample:

The sample group comprised a diverse cohort of first-generation Iranian women, reflecting a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, ages, occupations, positions within organizational hierarchies, and durations of residency in the US. The average age of the interviewees was 41 years old, with an average of 13 years spent living in the US. It's pertinent to note that the participants hailed from varying socioeconomic statuses, with some coming from privileged backgrounds while others faced socioeconomic challenges. Particularly in Iran, individuals belonging to minorities who represented different religious background, which corresponds with socioeconomic status have restricted access to official education and healthcare services (Farmand, 2021). Despite these challenges, upon immigrating to the US, these individuals pursued diverse professions, from childcare providers to scientists and university professors. However, most are highly educated (See Table I for participant demographics).

Data Collection:

This research originated from my positionality as an Iranian immigrant woman living in the West, whose own observations prompted an investigation into the experiences of Iranian women immigrants in U.S. workplaces. Participant recruitment utilized a two-stage process: initial recruitment occurred through social media networks, specifically through a Facebook post seeking participants. A Facebook connection, whom I had never met in person, responded by providing access to her network of approximately 35 potential participants - all Iranian women immigrants in the US. I then contacted these individuals, who were previously unknown to me, to recruit initial participants. This was followed by snowball sampling where initial respondents facilitated connections to additional participants. The recruitment criteria targeted women who were born and raised in Iran, had migrated to the US, and were actively employed across various sectors. This methodological approach allowed access to a diverse pool of

participants while maintaining appropriate distance from the researcher to ensure objectivity. None of the participants were family members or close personal acquaintances, which helped minimize potential selection bias.

Through this recruitment process, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 45 participants. Although all participants spoke English, interviews were conducted in Persian, their mother tongue, to facilitate more comfortable and nuanced discussions about their experiences of oppression. All interviews were conducted virtually through various applications and video software, with each session lasting approximately 50 minutes and being recorded.

The semi-structured interview method allowed for a structured yet flexible dialogue, where I had prepared questions to ensure coverage of key themes while also permitting the exploration of new topics that emerged spontaneously during the discussions (Magaldi and Berler, 2020). While guided by prepared questions, I generally let the interviewees lead me to the topics that were significant to them, making it clear that I was interested in learning about their oppression experiences. This approach effectively captured the complexity of their life stories and how they navigate challenges.

Following data collection, transcription was done manually since rarely any software or application has Persian among all the languages, or if they did, the software accuracy for transcription was very low. On average, each interview took 6 hours to be transcribed and translated.

Data Analysis:

The analysis process consisted of three distinct coding rounds – open coding, theoretical coding, and selective coding. In the initial open coding round, I conducted a detailed line-by-line analysis of the first ten fully translated interviews. Each interview was carefully examined

to identify any mention of how participants responded to experiences of oppression. I marked each unique response in the text and assigned it an initial descriptive code. This process yielded approximately 45 preliminary response codes, including codes such as "working extra hours," "seeking support from spouse," "documenting incidents," "building professional networks," "using humor as defense," "learning workplace rights," "maintaining cultural identity," and "mentoring others." These codes emerged directly from participants' descriptions rather than from preexisting theoretical frameworks. To ensure consistency, I maintained a coding log where I recorded each new code, its definition, and example quotes that illustrated it. When similar responses appeared, I compared them with existing codes to determine whether they represented truly new responses or variations of already-identified patterns.

In the second round, theoretical coding, I systematically compared these 45 initial codes with existing theoretical frameworks from both coping and resistance literature. This involved creating a matrix where I mapped each response code against key concepts from coping literature (e.g., emotion-focused coping, problem-focused coping) and resistance literature (e.g., individual resistance, collective action). Through this analysis, I began identifying patterns in how different responses related to theoretical concepts. For example, I found that responses like "working extra hours" and "improving language skills" aligned with traditional coping mechanisms, while responses like "mentoring others" and "building coalitions" showed clear elements of resistance. This process helped consolidate the initial 45 codes into broader theoretical categories.

In the final round, selective coding, I refined these theoretical categories into three distinct types: pure coping responses, pure resistance responses, and hybrid responses. This categorization emerged from the recognition that many responses didn't fit neatly into either coping or resistance frameworks. I systematically re-analyzed all 45 interviews using this three-

category framework, coding each response and noting how it fits within or challenged these categories. This process led to the identification of five key types of responses that exist on a continuum from coping to resistance: doubling the effort, embracing and leveraging anger, exercising voice, leveraging support and forging subversive coalitions, and building critical consciousness.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the coding process, I employed several strategies. First, I regularly consulted with one senior colleague experienced in qualitative research, who independently reviewed samples of my coding and provided feedback on my categorizations. Second, I conducted member checks with eight participants, sharing my interpretations and categories with them to verify that they accurately reflected their experiences. Finally, I maintained detailed analytical memos throughout the coding process, documenting my decision-making rationale, emerging patterns, and theoretical insights.

This systematic three-round coding process enabled me to move from raw material to theoretical insights while maintaining analytical rigor and ensuring comprehensive coverage of the various ways participants responded to workplace oppression. The progression from 45 initial response codes to five key types of responses represents a careful consolidation of the data that preserves the complexity of participants' experiences while making theoretical contributions to our understanding of how immigrant women navigate workplace oppression.

Main findings

The analysis identified five types of responses to experiences of oppression, which exist on a continuum from coping to resistance. Most responses exhibit characteristics of both coping and resistance; in other words, they include some form of adaptation to systems of oppression and some elements of challenging or resisting them. I elaborate on these responses below.

1. *Doubling the effort:*

Participants described the necessity of doubling the effort to prove their value and demonstrate their worth, illustrating the complex dynamics of navigating workplace oppression.

Doubling the effort often results from women feeling undermined, doubted, or subject to a double standard. For example, as another participant working as an infectious disease specialist described, '*When my colleagues in the committee did not accept my reasons for medical consultation, sometimes I would go out of my way to read many articles to find the best and most valid one to convince others, although this was not the case for others. Their opinions were accepted without proof, which disappointed me [42]'.* Her ability to access and leverage scientific articles to validate her expertise underscores the privilege of her academic position, which affords her the resources to substantiate her arguments with academic evidence. However, while effective in her field, this strategy highlights the broader issue of women needing to provide excessive proof of their competence, a requirement not equally demanded by their male counterparts.

On the other hand, there have been women who exerted significant effort and fought hard for promotions, and when they finally achieved them, their accomplishments were not acknowledged and encouraged like those of other individuals in the organization, as more senior and experienced individuals within the organization were not pleased with the promotion of a non-white woman. '*I doubled my effort to win more and more scholarships and awards, and the next time I asked them, they had to announce it publicly. I should not be ignored because others become sad about my success [14]'.* This demonstrates the impossibility of doubling the work as a strategy for actually achieving equality; even when these women put in more work and reach similar achievements, they are still subject to unequal treatment. This participant's determination to have her accomplishments publicly acknowledged speaks to a larger struggle

against an ingrained system of oppression that not only fails to recognize but actively undermines the achievements of marginalized individuals.

Others put in more work in the hopes of being promoted to a different role associated with more respect from clients and the organization. For example, one woman working as a dental assistant, who was often asked to do office cleaning even though it was not in the job description, was putting in more effort to become a hygienist: *'I do want to become a dental hygienist instead of a dental assistant. As a dental assistant, they sometimes ask me to clean the walls after the patients have left. It is absolutely not my task, but I do this extra work because I know they won't promote me if I decline. I am doubling my efforts; Studying these materials and preparing for the exams is not easy [15]'.*

Her determination to pursue further studies and certification is driven by a desire for a higher position that commands more authority and respect, reflecting an effort to overcome occupational limitations and systemic undervaluation of her current role.

In the case of another participant, a postdoctoral researcher, she understood that having a publication as soon as possible was the only way that her advisor would be less abusive toward her: *'I doubled my effort so I could finish the post-doctoral research. I was professional due to reading so much, so I published in the best journal. After that publication, she [supervisor] started behaving herself [21]'.*

The pressure to publish not only aims at mitigating abusive treatment from her supervisor but is also strategic in securing a stable future in her host country, highlighting how the publication serves dual purposes: enhancing her professional profile and supporting her green card application. This approach reflects a broader trend where immigrants, especially in academia, navigate additional hurdles, including the need to secure stable employment and

residency status, often requiring exceptional professional achievements (Strauβ and Boncori, 2020).

The above examples demonstrate how migrant women often go above and beyond their job description, taking on additional tasks or doing work in their own time to try and prove themselves, fit in, or be recognized for their work like non-minoritized colleagues are. This type of response to oppression can generally be understood as coping, as it does not challenge existing systems of oppression as much as it helps participants adapt to and manage within these systems. In this way, participants experience a sort of double oppression.

2. *Embracing and leveraging anger*

Another way participants respond to experiences of oppression is by embracing and mobilizing anger. One participant explained: **'***When I entered one of the cancer labs in one of the labs in the US, an American lady looked into my eyes and said, 'Look at this terrorist'. I have heard a lot of these types of sentences. But I don't let them make me down. I don't feel bad when I hear this stuff. To be honest, I have never actively done anything to reduce the negative feelings associated with these types of behavior. I prefer to keep the anger inside me, and then I turn the anger into achievement. Each time they said something nasty to me, I tried and achieved something unbelievable. Now, I have my own lab at the second most famous pharmaceutical company in the United States [33]'.*

Most literature on coping suggests that people who experience oppression act to reduce the negative feelings it brings on, but this suggests that rather than move to reduce anger, some participants welcome it and use it to resist. This type of oppression response underscores the transformative potential of anger (Perlow, 2018) when channeled into motivation and action, challenging the normative expectations of coping by not just enduring but thriving in the face of adversity (Fitts, 2011; Friedrich, 2024). Anger can be a potent catalyst for the emancipation

of women by motivating action and inspiring change. Such responses challenge the conventional wisdom on coping mechanisms, advocating for a recognition of the diverse and complex ways individuals resist oppression and transform their experiences into sources of empowerment. Not all these ways of reducing negative feelings are normative, like this interviewee: *'I insult her inside [21]'.* This internal dialogue, though unseen, acts as a shield, preserving her dignity and self-esteem and asserting herself amidst external assaults on her identity.

Another participant describes how she channels her anger to fuel her work: '*People are so aggressive, maybe because of the freezing climate here. People do not have control over their anger. When someone makes a mistake, they don't think maybe it was not on purpose. The first assumption is that it was done intentionally. They throw money into your face, but they do not have the same behavior as natives. They are angry, and they make you angry as well. Working under pressure with intense feelings is not an easy thing to do. I use my anger to give them the best birthday cakes they want with the best design. This is how I am handling it [21]'.* While anger can be a source of resistance for some, it also comes at a high cost, as illustrated by one participant who endured years of abuse before ultimately channeling her anger into a book about the experience: '*After 13 years in the same job, I still never felt like I fit in. I expressed my frustration, emphasizing that even after 13, I still faced these situations as if I were expected to endure them as a woman. They couldn't fire the person who abused me because profit was more important to them. It's not reasonable at all. I could have filed a complaint against this company, but then I realized how much energy I would need, and sadly, I don't think these issues would be resolved quickly. I endured it, watched silently, and said nothing. The person who harassed me sent a false report against me, claiming that I had left my job earlier. I proposed they check the closed-circuit cameras to see who was correct, but in the end, they did not even apologize for their false claims. All these negative feelings left me*

with no choice but to write about these stories in my book, and I got my book published after quitting the company [10]'.

Embracing and leveraging anger in response to oppression is a complex interplay of personal resilience, available outlets for expression, and the broader societal and systemic contexts. While it can be a powerful source of resistance and motivation, it also carries risks that require careful navigation to ensure that anger serves as a catalyst for positive change rather than a source of further distress (Griffin, 2012).

3. Exercising voice

Exercising voice was another way that participants responded to experiences of oppression, which can be understood as a form of resistance. The dynamics of this response varied depending on the organizational structures and hierarchies as well as individual support. One interviewee, a post-doctoral researcher within an academic setting, narrated her experience: *'I went to the Dean of research and started talking to him about the supervisors' behaviors. He was so supportive and told me to ask him for a recommendation letter if needed. He gave me the courage to talk [13]'.* Other participants found support and an avenue to exercise voice in their HR teams: *'I like the way HR is so supportive here. When that colleague said something kidding and disrespectful, I told HR, and they supported me [44]'.*

However, clearly, in some other cases, participants experienced challenges. Comparing the culture with the host country's culture and being dubious about how they might judge you if you talk about other people's behavior is something at the back of their minds to consider while considering whether to speak up. As one of the interviewees shared her story: *'As a woman, you can't protest much against the system in Iran. But being here, I've learned that I can voice my objections and get the answers I want. Although sometimes it may not work, I can still speak up. It is not like Iran at all. If a woman objects, people label her with some disgusting features. Here, at least, they listen and try not to be judgmental in your face [23]'.* In another

case, the precarious immigration status tempered a participant's ability to speak up: '*Regarding the sexual harassment, I asked HR and filed a complaint. I was afraid of becoming jobless and receiving a rejection for my green card [30]'.*

Sometimes, despite efforts to exercise voice, participants experienced obstacles due to unclear HR policies or expectations: '*Once, one of my colleagues said something that he was not supposed to say. I went to HR and told them what had happened. As it was my first experience, I did not know that when I reported something like this, I had to be aware of what specifically I wanted (apologies, relocation of that person's office, etc.), but now, I am well aware. In this regard, I suggest HR provide codes of conduct and hold training courses for all staff. I am happy I was effective [18]'.*

Similar to other forms of resistance, exercising voice sometimes comes with a cost: *'Once I spoke up, I faced his [my boss] harsh and bitter behavior, and I told him they did not deserve good employees. The boss was shocked, and he did not expect this behavior. Showing them that I was aware of my rights after three years of working there. My brother-in-law is a famous lawyer in the US. He helped me become aware of my rights. Several times, he accompanied me to the labor union. But I didn't continue because I found another job [6]*'.

While most instances of exercising voice happened within the workplace, one participant shared a story of less conventional expression through the creation of origami inspired by her experiences, which she sold at the local market: '*The figures I created as origami is of a girl in various poses. Customers often wonder why they are all girls, and I explain the events that have happened to me and the inspiration behind my origami creations [6]'.* This act of selling allowed her to showcase her work and resist her experiences of oppression and opened the door to discussions about these experiences with many other people.

4. Leveraging support and forging subversive coalitions

Another response to experiences of oppression that took the form of resistance was forming subversive coalitions. One interviewee shared her experience of taking legal action against the CEO. She found strength and support through a colleague in the human resources department, which significantly eased the process and emboldened her to pursue this course of action. This act of challenging the CEO was subversive because it directly confronted the established power dynamics within the organization: '*Having Daniel as a professional colleague from HR by my side helped me a lot to overcome all those fears. I found the power to file a complaint and sued the CEO in court [4]'*. Subversive behavior can also manifest in less formal and more creative ways, as illustrated by one interviewee sharing experiences of dealing with an impolite manager's behavior: '*She was so rude, and when she passed by our office; she covered her nose; implying that we [Iranian colleagues] smelled. We were three in one office. We decided to buy three different air fresheners and use them when she passes our office. We also asked her for a public apology as compensation [8]'.* In certain instances, demonstrating to those upholding an oppressive system that the onus is on them to depart or face exclusion, rather than the victims of oppression, was also adopted as a strategy to curtail such behaviors: '*My employer was extremely cruel, not only to me but to everyone. One day, the employees agreed to give him a decent lesson. I made a luxury Persian breakfast for the group, but we didn't extend an invitation to him. He became aware of something while eating it—the aroma of the delectable dish. He was taken aback that we hadn't invited him. We said, 'Let's go Dutch; this breakfast costs fifty dollars for each of us.' Although the price surprised him, we assured him he could join and pay the remaining 50. He paid, and we divided that fifty among us. It was not a huge amount, but after that, he tried to be nicer [31]'.*

Leveraging support and forging subversive coalitions to resist systems of oppression was not restricted to coalitions within the workplace. In multiple cases, participants described friendships or partnerships outside of work as subversive coalitions. Several participants

discussed their marriage to American men as a resource in challenging systems of oppression: '*I married an American guy; I asked him about the details of my work rights and American workplace regulations [15]'.* or who said: *'Marriage to an American person/ I can ask about the regulations and laws; he is so supportive [1]'.* This support and help from a native husband was advantageous in various ways. For one of the interviewees whose English was not perfect and who experienced oppression due to language, practicing with her husband as a native speaker was a way of going through the experience: *'I am working on my language. I think the progress is slow, but I know it will work a day. I married here to an American man. He is so supportive and helps me a lot, specifically practicing English [39]'.* Another case for other interviewees is that she is a professor at an American state university who is married to an American husband, and her daughter is now studying at the very same university: *'I married an American white man. Now, my daughter resembles me. She is just much brighter than me. I have the feeling she is less non-American than me. I taught her to follow her dreams and not let her gender limit her [44]'.* Also, having an Arabic Muslim family name made an interviewee think of taking the husband's family name: *'I married a Mexican man who was born and raised in the States. During that time, I really considered changing my last name and taking my husband's last name instead. [18]'.* Of course, relying on men and marriage as a source of resistance is complicated by the fact that women may remain in a position of disadvantage or dependence. However, the experiences of these participants demonstrate how coalitions outside of work may be a source of support and resistance against racist oppression, even if they also reflect patriarchal power arrangements.

5. Building critical consciousness

Finally, participants also discussed resisting their oppression through educating and informing others. For instance, one person facing challenges with their advisor tried to caution

potential students, aiming to protect them from potential mistreatment in the future: *'I definitely told the others who came to this prof about what it's like here, and they freed themselves from this person sooner than I did [14]'.* Newcomers are more likely to encounter these challenges, especially when there isn't a clear protocol to guide them. In such situations, newcomers might feel lost and uncertain about what steps to take if they experience oppression *'Also, I myself try to tell newcomers what to do and what not to do in case something happens [18]'.*

Experiencing oppression or similar situations doesn't always lead to a straightforward path of going to court and filing a complaint. It's not just time-consuming and draining in terms of energy, but the process of proving oppression and its psychological impact can be immense. Often, it's more feasible to resolve these issues within the organization itself. One of the interviewees encountered this and chose to educate a colleague, aiming to prevent similar events from happening again based on her own experiences: *'The approach is essential because oppression always exists, and it's not always possible to file a complaint. I don't want another person to have this experience. I know that this person will do the same thing to someone else, so I will prevent it from happening. For example, I advise my Indian colleague to assert themselves and say no when their rights are violated, such as taking credit for their work [7]'.*

Raising awareness about these issues doesn't always occur solely within organizations; it extends beyond their boundaries. For example, some interviewees engage in giving talks at schools and various events outside their workplace to raise awareness and encourage change and inclusivity: *'I am invited to different schools to talk about Engineering. I try to encourage young girls to believe that women can be engineers. I talk about the positive and negative sides of being an Engineer. I tell them this is us who should reduce the negative impacts by becoming the majority instead of the minority [18]'.* Similarly, another participant shared: *'I made many speeches for different conferences and seminars to show them that women are capable of doing*

this job and women can have high positions. I do not know how effective I was, but I did my best [42]'. As a result of these efforts, the state government has recently extended invitations to scholars and women in high-ranking positions. They are asked to share their challenges, aiming to create a systematic approach against marginalization (McDonald and Coleman, 1999). This is not just a series of random individual actions; it is a deliberate effort by the government to address and counteract marginalization by involving both students and managers in these discussions: *'I give lectures in different universities and schools. It is a scheme from the States for the young female generation to explain that they can choose any field they want. I was invited many times. But, after a while, I actively search for communities to tell them to follow their dreams. Gender should not be a barrier [44]'.*

Participants also leveraged social media to raise awareness about their experiences: *'It's been 20 years or more that I have been using different platforms for writing about work/life experiences challenges and experiences of oppression, from having a weblog to having an Instagram account and other forums [36]'.* Furthermore, leveraging these platforms to seek advice and share sensitive organizational details, such as salary ranges, proves to be highly beneficial: *'I have tried to write posts on social media to raise awareness about salary negotiations. Also, I wrote one post on my LinkedIn about the previous institute I used to work for because they were so rude to me [27]'*

Discussion:

Drawing on the experiences of Iranian women in the US, this study bridged the literature on coping and resistance to explore how immigrant women respond to workplace oppression. The analysis identified five types of responses to oppression, most of which draw on elements of both coping and resistance and, in doing so, generate new insights into the dynamics of navigating and responding to workplace oppression.

Previous work on understanding responses to experiences of oppression has been approached in terms of psychological coping – focused primarily on short-term, individual acts to reduce negative feelings associated with oppression (Phillips *et al.,* 2015) or mainly in terms of resistance – focused specifically on how oppressed groups resist and challenge systems of oppression (Moardi, 2017; Smith, 2020), through actions ranging from public protest to subtler workplace or private organizing and speaking up to mimicry and subversion (Galvan-Alvarez et al., 2020). Both of these streams of literature have been instrumental in shedding light on how marginalized groups deal with oppression. Yet this study suggests that responses to oppression often exist on a continuum between exclusively coping or resisting, often including elements of both. In this way, I have attempted to bring these two literatures together, allowing for a more nuanced perspective on the ways marginalized groups respond to oppression. More specifically, this research generates new insights into the ambiguity, temporality, and spatiality of responses to oppression that may be missed when viewing it from the perspectives of coping or resistance alone.

First, there is ambiguity in distinguishing between responses that are 'coping' and responses that are 'resistance'. Many responses have elements of both. Some responses are uniquely aimed at reducing negative feelings while experiencing oppression and do not address the fundamental resolution of the issue, such as doubling the effort to prove one's worth, for example, the existence of a double standard for scientific proof or challenges for getting promoted. On the other hand, some of the responses try to deal with the root of the cause of oppression and try to challenge the oppressive system, for example, by educating others and trying to prevent the same experiences from happening to others. Most responses, however, may be understood as a hybrid of coping and resistance. In these cases, women try to challenge the oppressive systems while reducing the negative feelings and experiencing having access to many services that were forbidden in their homeland. These responses could happen completely

individually or collectively, seeking a same-minded community (Sonn and Fisher, 1998; Wickstrom et al., 2021).

Second, the findings highlight the temporality of responses to oppression in that they exist over time, are often ongoing, and cannot necessarily be understood simply as discrete acts following one-off instances of oppression. For example, participants discuss *years* of experiencing oppression, with ongoing attempts to cope or resist it. The finding of forging subversive coalitions through marriage also highlights how responding to oppression can be a lifetime commitment. Some participants who have experienced oppression are continually striving to educate other members of vulnerable groups to prevent the recurrence of similar bitter experiences. These efforts are aimed at broader community awareness and profoundly influence how they raise their children. By sharing their own experiences of oppression, they ensure that the next generation and young students are better informed and prepared to navigate and resist such challenges. This educational initiative serves as both a protective measure and a means of empowerment (Valencia, 2023), fostering resilience and a deeper understanding of systemic oppression (Crann and Barata, 2021). Moreover, contending with oppressive conditions doesn't always manifest itself in forms like marriage or education, which can have a more positive appearance. At times, the struggle against ongoing oppression can be much harsher. Continued exposure to oppression can be life-threatening, sometimes leading to extreme responses such as suicide. This highlights a lethal aspect of ongoing oppression, illustrating how it can escalate to life-threatening levels and contribute to burnout and resource erosion (Gorski and Chen, 2015). These dynamics are well documented in the literature (Gorski and Erakat, 2019; Gorski and Chen, 2015), with scholars emphasizing how ongoing oppression depletes individual resources, potentially leading to severe psychological outcomes like burnout. So, this highlights the importance of viewing responses to oppression as part of a broader, interconnected social process that requires communal and institutional support to

challenge systems of oppression and sustain individuals over time. This perspective might ensure that those engaged in these efforts are supported holistically (Moon and Sandage, 2019).

Finally, departing from studies that tend to focus solely on the workplace in examining responses to oppression (Sonn and Fisher, 2023; Philips *et al.,* 2015), the findings show how responses span across the professional and personal/private as well as home and host country. Even if the oppression itself is experienced in the workplace, its effects and the way women respond to it expand well beyond into home lives and personal lives. In addition, Iranian women rely on American spouses in order to navigate the legal system, among other forms of support. Their responses to oppression further inform how they raise their children. This resonates with some of the literature on resistance, which identifies the home as a site of feminist resistance (e.g., Alkhaled, 2021). In addition, the findings show how experiences of and responses to oppression in the host workplace cannot be separated from experiences of oppression in the home country; indeed, the former is shaped by and entangled with the latter. Together, these reveal a spatiality of coping and resistance that is not often addressed in studies of workplace oppression.

Overall, integrating perspectives on coping and resistance offers a more holistic view of how individuals respond to systemic oppression at work. Further, the lens of intersectionality helps shed light on the way intersecting markers of difference (gender, immigrant status, race/ethnicity) inform experiences of and responses to oppression. The intersectional framework reveals the nuanced and varied ways in which Iranian women experience workplace oppression in the US, emphasizing that these experiences are not monolithic but are instead shaped by multiple, intersecting aspects of their identities like other oppressed, marginalized groups. An Iranian woman's experience and response to workplace oppression can be profoundly influenced by her socioeconomic status (and other aspects like religious

background, length of residence in the US, and her specific community ties). For example, having a fragile position as an immigrant and not knowing your rights.

Contribution and Conclusion:

The theoretical and practical contributions of this research advance our understanding of how professional immigrant women navigate workplace oppression and what might be done about to support this. This study reconceptualizes how we understand professional immigrant women's responses to workplace oppression by demonstrating that these responses transcend traditional boundaries between coping and resistance. Rather than treating these as distinct categories, the findings reveal a complex continuum where most responses incorporate elements of both coping and resistance. This hybrid nature of responses challenges existing theoretical frameworks that tend to categorize actions as either adaptive (coping) or transformative (resistance). The study's identification of ambiguity, temporality, and spatiality as key dimensions of these responses provides a more nuanced theoretical framework for understanding how marginalized individuals navigate oppressive systems while simultaneously working to transform them.

At the practical level, the research reveals critical insights about the limitations of current organizational approaches to workplace oppression. Traditional support systems and diversity initiatives often fail to address the complex needs of immigrant women professionals, particularly when formal voice mechanisms prove inadequate for creating meaningful change. The findings highlight how organizational policies and practices frequently privilege assimilation over authentic inclusion, suggesting the need for fundamental reforms in how organizations approach diversity and inclusion work.

Beyond organizational boundaries, the research demonstrates the crucial importance of informal support networks that blend professional and personal resources. Iranian immigrant

women develop sophisticated support systems through colleague relationships and community connections that prove more valuable than formal organizational initiatives. These networks serve multiple functions - providing immediate emotional support, facilitating knowledge sharing about navigating workplace challenges, and enabling collective resistance efforts. The findings emphasize how these informal networks help immigrant women maintain their professional identities while dealing with multiple forms of oppression.

The research also contributes to understanding how broader sociopolitical contexts shape workplace experiences and response strategies. Immigration policies and international tensions create specific vulnerabilities that manifest in daily workplace interactions, suggesting the need for policy-level interventions beyond organizational solutions. For Iranian immigrant women in the US, this means developing strategies that address both immediate professional challenges and deeper structural barriers arising from their unique sociopolitical position. These findings highlight the importance of creating dedicated spaces for knowledge sharing and mutual support while working toward systemic change at organizational, community, and policy levels.

Finally, this work advances methodological approaches to studying workplace oppression by demonstrating the value of examining responses across multiple domains - professional and personal, public and private, home and host country. This holistic analytical approach reveals how responses to workplace oppression extend far beyond organizational boundaries, informing aspects of women's lives from family relationships to child-rearing practices. This methodological contribution suggests the need for more comprehensive research approaches that can capture the full complexity of how marginalized professionals navigate and resist workplace oppression**.**

Overall, this study has revealed that the responses of Iranian women to workplace oppression in the US are complex and multifaceted, often blending elements of both coping and

resistance into what can be described as hybrid strategies. These responses are deeply influenced by their intersecting identities, including gender, immigration status, minoritized racial/ethnic position, socioeconomic status, religious background, and length of residence in the US. This research emphasizes that while Iranian women may face significant challenges, they also display remarkable resilience and adaptability. Moreover, the study highlights that how women navigate and respond to oppression is not solely dependent on individual characteristics but is also influenced by the social context and availability of broader support systems or solidarity networks. Additionally, the findings underscore the importance of considering oppression's temporal and spatial dimensions. Responses to oppression are not static or isolated events but are part of an ongoing process that evolves over time and can vary significantly depending on the individual's environment and stage of life. By integrating insights on coping and resistance, this study offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding responses to workplace oppression. It encourages a reevaluation of how oppression, resistance, and coping are understood and studied, thereby contributing to ongoing work on immigrant women's experiences of workplace oppression.

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