

Online disclosure, a mechanism for seeking informal justice?

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Abstract

Recent scholarship considers digital platforms' potential to serve as sites for feminist counter-spaces. 'Speaking out' or disclosing gender-based violence online allows survivors to give voice to their experiences and create a political arena for seeking informal forms of justice. What is significant in these instances is not a shift away from formal justice mechanisms but how the alternative ones take a survivor-focused approach to meet their needs and interests. The survivors who choose to disclose publicly – by describing their experiences in their own words – seek validation and solidarity and hold their perpetrators responsible for the harm they caused. Based on a multilevel justice approach, this research studies how – or whether – digital platforms enable community recognition and awareness regarding gender-based violence in Turkey. By exploring the experiences of six women from Turkey who were subjected to gender-based violence and disclosed online, we ask what justice means for our participants, why they chose to disclose digitally, and for what purposes. We consider their reasons for and experiences of such online disclosures and examine the extent to which these meet their justice needs. While it is evident that online spaces can function as sites of informal justice, it is vital to ask for whom and in which contexts justice can be achieved online. The data is analysed concerning the anti-gender resistance and the recent decline in human rights and judicial justice in Turkey.

Keywords

#me too, gender-based violence, informal justice, online disclosure, online justice, Turkey

Research suggests that digital platforms have many potentials for feminist political activism against gender-based violence (Fileborn, 2014, 2017; O'Neill, 2018; Powell, 2015; Salter, 2013). Online disclosure of male violence by survivors is emphasised as an essential avenue for such advocacy

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efforts. 'Speaking out' (Serisier, 2018) is regarded as challenging 'dominant representations of sexual violence' (Fileborn, 2017: 1483) and, thus, facilitating a collective action (Loney-Howes et al., 2022). These 'counter-public engagements' (Powell, 2015: 19) are also explored as sites of seeking alternative forms of justice by survivors (Fileborn, 2014; Salter, 2013). Considering the inefficiencies of formal justice processes (Daly, 2017; Herman, 2005), scholars suggest that survivors use digital spaces to seek a form of 'community or informal justice outside of the state' (Powell, 2015: 573).

Our research, by situating six women's lived experiences of online disclosure in Turkey, draws on previous work on online justice (i.e. Fileborn 2014, 2017; Gundersen and Zaleski, 2021; Loney-Howes, 2020; O'Neill, 2018; Powell, 2015; Salter, 2013; Wood et al., 2019). We explore how digital platforms can be utilised to seek 'informal' justice by survivors of gender-based violence. We examine what justice means for our participants, why they have chosen to disclose digitally and for what purposes. We also explore to what extent their justice 'needs' or 'interests' are met through the online disclosures. We argue that considering the systemic barriers to 'achieve' justice through formal mechanisms and the increasing dominance of anti-gender politics and ideologies in Turkey, online disclosure can be used as a community justice seeking tool by survivors. Thus, we suggest that 'speaking out' online – despite its potential drawbacks and limitations – can provide survivors with a sense of informal justice by fulfilling their needs for voice, recognition/validation, acknowledgement, and support/solidarity.

In this paper, we will first look at the previous literature on discussing survivors' justice needs and online justice-seeking. Later, we will introduce the context in Turkey where our participants' reasons for disclosure and their experiences afterwards are situated. This section will be followed by the presentation and discussion of our findings.

Formal processes of seeking justice and survivor needs

Complaints made through the formal system bear the risk of being 'put away' and 'ending up in a file' (Ahmed, 2022). Studies show that formal justice responses to gender-based violence remain ineffective in meeting survivors' justice needs and many survivors experience the criminal justice system as re-victimising (Clark, 2015; Daly, 2017; Fileborn, 2017; Herman, 2005) – as a 'site of harm, (or even) injustice' (Fileborn, 2017: 1484). Daly (2017) addresses the unpreparedness of formal justice system to deal with the complexities of cases that involve sexual and/or gender-based violence. Factors such as overemphasis on 'physical evidence', common questioning of survivors' credibility, and stigmatising or discriminatory judgements inherent within the system responses are underlined as critical barriers to survivors' access to justice through formal mechanisms (Clark, 2015; Daly, 2017; Herman, 2005; Koss, 2000).

For many survivors, receiving a legal outcome may take time, and the process itself can be highly challenging (Clark, 2015; Herman, 2005). It is argued that this is mainly because survivors' perspectives of justice and their related needs are not sufficiently represented in the conventional legal system (Clark, 2015; Daly, 2017; Herman, 2005). In accordance, the previous studies by feminist criminologists showed that justice could only be enabled when survivors have information, voice, participation, control, and offender accountability in the process (i.e. Clark, 2015; Daly, 2017; Herman, 2005; McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019; McGlynn et al., 2012). Survivors could feel justice when they are allowed to disclose their experiences in their own words, when

they have enough information and control while navigating through court system, and when what is expressed is validated, supported, and believed and the offenders are held responsible for their actions both by the state authorities and their communities.

Furthermore, in exploring the multiplicity and complexity of survivors' justice needs, McGlynn and Westmarland (2019: 196) suggest the concept of 'kaleidoscopic justice' and describe justice as a constantly evolving lived experience rather than a linear one only equated with punishment as a 'singular justice solution'. In this respect, they emphasise diversity and dynamism of justice perspectives as defined by victims/survivors themselves and argue that 'different elements of the kaleidoscope will have greater significance and resonance for each victim-survivor' (McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019: 196). This approach also refers to a multilevel justice perspective, indicating broader concept of social or transformative justice beyond individual cases or experiences. Similarly, Clark (2015) and Herman (2005) also suggest that survivors' justice interests may include their demands for community recognition and awareness regarding gender-based violence and better community support, as well as more effective systemic and structural responses to violence against women.

Resource mobilisation and seeking justice online: Potentials and limitations

Resources are essential for activism. Once these resources are available, activists can mobilise these resources and use them for engagement (Buyantueva, 2020). While countable and transferable objects like money serve as the resource, so does knowing or connecting with people, or spreading information, as they also help mobilise. Taking the resource mobilisation perspective, digital media platforms become networking tools (resources) where individuals and communities create and share messages with large audiences and collective sentiment around certain issues emerge (Hess and Waller, 2014).

Considering gender-based violence, digital mobilisations, by giving a voice to survivors, allows them to cohere communities and form a shared identity, active agency, and catalysed purpose (Loney-Howes, 2020; O'Neill, 2018). Salter (2013) calls this the 'trial by Internet' where these platforms provide powerful opportunities for those who lack access to or faith in the criminal justice system. Smart (1989: 81) states that when the formal justice system fails to meet justice needs, survivors seek 'alternative' or informal justice paths: 'There are other ways of challenging popular consciousness other than through law, even though law may on occasions provide a catalyst'.

According to Crawley and Simic (2019: 259), the alternative forms of justice all serve the purpose of 'feel[ing] heard and seek[ing] an acknowledgment of the harm caused'. This in return leads to an 'hashtag activism' across the globe, where women share their experiences of gender-based violence. Such a new justice environment created on digital platforms constructs a narrative of strength (Fileborn, 2017; Powell, 2015). In fact, women from all walks of life create what Fraser (1992: 123) refers as the 'parallel discursive arenas', the counter-publics (Salter, 2013). For Powell, these counterpublic-driven actions intersect with the state and represent the development of new technosocial practices of informal justice (Powell, 2015). She suggests: '(i)n the people's courts of new and social media it is possible for women victims to be heard and supported . . . in a way not currently offered by formal criminal justice processes' (Powell, 2015: 581).

Studies on online disclosure demonstrate that online spaces enable the building of survivor communities and, as a result, feelings of empowerment and justice (Chowdhury and Fileborn, 2020; Fileborn, 2014, 2017; Loney-Howes, 2020; Mendes et al., 2018; O'Neill, 2018; Powell, 2015; Salter, 2013). These spaces allow for the contestation of the dominant patriarchal culture where one feels free to voice one's own experiences and even witness 'their perpetrators punished or publicly condemned' (Fileborn, 2017: 1486). In addition, studies highlight that online communities allow survivors seeking advice and information, getting recognition, being validated, and establishing networked connections with supportive others (i.e. Chowdhury and Fileborn, 2020; Loney-Howes, 2020; O'Neill, 2018). Online platforms hence act as a 'mechanism or avenue for fulfilling victim/survivors . . . justice needs' (Fileborn, 2014: 47). Aligning with a multilevel justice approach (Clark, 2015; McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019), online disclosures are framed as a form of collective political action, to be used for consciousness-raising and to create community dialogue, mobilisation, and transformation by challenging social injustices (Fileborn, 2017; Loney-Howes et al., 2022; Mendes et al., 2018).

However, besides its potentialities for empowerment, justice, and social transformation, research also shows that the use of digital platforms by survivors has its limitations and downsides. First, digital platforms can be vulnerable spaces for survivors as it increases their chances of encountering with cyber-harassment (Chowdhury and Fileborn, 2020). Likewise, when survivor stories go viral on online platforms, they lose control over their stories (Powell, 2015; Wood et al., 2019). Contrary to the intentions of survivors, the stories can then be used in reproducing problematic understandings of gender-based violence (Loney-Howes et al., 2022). In addition, scholars highlight the diversity among survivors (i.e. Chowdhury and Fileborn, 2020; Loney-Howes, 2020; Salter, 2013) reminding that not all women have resources enabling them to 'negotiate and navigate online geographies of safety/unsafety' (Fileborn, 2017: 1498; Salter, 2013). Intersectionality comes up as another critical issue here as voices of women and individuals with marginalised identities are often underrepresented or missing in online spaces, and the credibility of their stories are questioned more often compared to cis-gendered, heterosexual, middle-class women (Loney-Howes et al., 2022; Tuzcu, 2016).

Online advocacy against male violence in Turkey

The high prevalence of gender-based violence and femicide, the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021, and the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) 'family-centred social policies, pro-marriage anti-abortion incentives as well as significant impediments to human rights and democracy . . . and control over mainstream media' (Eslen-Ziya and Kazanoğlu, 2022: 103) constitutes the current political climate in Turkey. In this context of increasing anti-democratic practices as well as the intimidating politics and state violence, we see a significant rise in digital advocacy efforts against the oppressive gender politics, leading to a strong feminist online activism (Göker, 2019; Şener, 2021). Online disclosure of gender-based violence, in particular, became a critical part of these efforts in shaping the public debates about violence against women in Turkey (Ogan and Baş, 2020).

Through hashtag activism, women, regardless of their feminist or activist identities, shared their stories of being subjected to violence and, via these individual stories, mobilised online spaces to encourage other women to relate and share their own experiences (Göker, 2019; Ogan

and Bař, 2020; řener, 2021). For instance, #sendeanlat (#tellyourstory), started by a Turkish academic, Idil Elveriř, after the rape and killing of a young woman in 2015, is a critical example of widespread online anti-rape activism in Turkey. Elveriř invited women to tell their individual stories of male violence and sexual harassment to show 'how [the] harassment problem is widespread and systemic' (Ikizer et al., 2019; Sozeri, 2015). An analysis of 164,279 original tweets shared under this hashtag, for instance, showed how the tweets created a 'counter-public sphere' challenging common misogynistic myths about rape and honour (Ikizer et al., 2019). Another study by Ogan and Bař (2020), investigating six different hashtag campaigns on Twitter, illustrated that the campaigns found considerable support and were used by many people for seeking solidarity, reminiscence, remembrance, and information.

#Uykulanizkacsin (#loseyoursleep, #maytheylosesleep) is another and more recent example of hashtag activism against male violence in Turkey. In 2020, this hashtag presented a scenario in which revelations about well-known male authors' harassment were made public. It was then followed by disclosures regarding similar experiences suffered by women authors, editors, translators, and later women academics. They shared their stories on Twitter and asked others with similar experiences to join them in disclosing:

Dear women, we have opened an email address where women who were subjected to the harassment and violence of influential men in literature, cinema, and poetry, and who could not find the courage to voice them for reasons known by all, can share their stories. So many emails have come . . . and there are doctors, writers, academics, rappers, and influencers among them . . . My dearest women, you are never alone, and you will never walk alone! (Bianet, 2020).

'You'll never walk alone' has then become a critical motto of digital feminist activism in Turkey, through which survivors of gender-based violence seek information, advise, support, and solidarity (řener, 2021).

Along with these hashtag movements, the use of digital spaces (i.e. blogs, websites, or social media accounts) to address issues around patriarchal oppression and gender-based violence became an increasingly common practice among feminist activists and organisations (Göker, 2019; řener, 2021; řen and Kök, 2017). řener (2021), based on in-depth interviews with social media moderators of major feminist organisations in Turkey, suggests that digital feminist activism occurs at three levels: visibility, awareness-raising, and solidarity. That is, digital activism aims to 'enable women to raise their voices and pursue discursive struggles against patriarchy' (řener, 2021: 67) and to establish networked connections for solidarity and support. Based on an analysis of three feminist blogs/websites in Turkey, Göker (2019: 325) suggests how these digital platforms present 'creative way[s] of doing politics . . . by providing a platform for the expression of women's shared everyday problems which are closely connected to a larger political context'.

Besides highlighting potentialities of online platforms, the limitations of online justice-seeking and digital activism in Turkey should also be acknowledged as these critically shape the context of our study. The authoritarian politics of Turkey target social media use by increasing surveillance on social media accounts, prosecuting citizens because of their tweets, and demanding more state control on digital platforms (Ogan and Bař, 2020). Feminists and LGBTIQ+ activists, among many other groups, are particularly targeted with accusations of being the 'enemies' of the state and

'family peace'. This context may limit the use of social media for activism. In addition, social media becomes a tool of conservative groups in showing their support for discriminatory policies and practices, spreading their messages, and suppressing the voices of marginalised individuals and groups. A very recent study, for instance, examining the widespread online counter-activism in Turkey, demonstrates how social media becomes an important tool for anti-feminist groups in channelling their hate and hostility towards feminists and LGBTIQ+ communities, and how their discourses are used by the state for anti-democratic aims (Eslen-Ziya, 2022).

Situating the present study: Strengths, limitations, and positionality

In this study, we explore the lived experiences of a group of women in Turkey who publicly shared their stories of male violence online and we focus on their definitions of and desires for justice. We aim to examine at what point digital media platforms and/or the desire to achieve online justice became a resource for them. Locating our study into the broader literature on digital anti-violence activism and online justice seeking discussed above, we argue that online platforms, despite limitations and drawbacks, are one of the alternative venues where women may seek justice. As these online spaces become a location of informal justice for some survivors, we consider that what this informal justice means for survivors, or whether it is enough for them, is vital to investigate.

Although research on online anti-violence activism and online justice seeking has been growing, there is still a limited number of studies focusing on 'first-hand' experiences of survivors who disclose their experiences of male violence online (see examples by Fileborn, 2017; Gundersen and Zaleski, 2021; Loney-Howes, 2020). Thus, our qualitative study seeks to contribute to this literature by investigating survivors' accounts of their motivations and intentions for disclosing their experiences and their perspectives regarding online justice-seeking.

We also situate our research into the scant literature on digital feminist activism in Turkey (i.e. Eslen-Ziya, 2013, 2022; Göker, 2019; Ogan and Baş, 2020; Şener, 2021; Şen and Kök, 2017) and aim to contribute to this literature by looking at survivors' experiences of online disclosure and justice. Considering the widespread systemic and structural barriers to safety and justice (Ekal, 2017; Yalcinoz-Ucan, 2022) – mainly unresponsiveness by the police, inefficient and problematic criminal justice system responses, and inaccessibility of formal supports – we consider that online ways of seeking support and demand justice may become critical for survivors.

We acknowledge that survivors of gender-based violence in Turkey, like across the globe, are composed of very diverse groups of people. Thus, our study has its limitations in representing such diversity. We are aware that online spaces are not accessible and available equally for every survivor, and the voices of marginalised and disadvantaged groups (i.e. gender minorities, people with disabilities, older people, socioeconomically disadvantaged women, and ethnic minorities) are not represented widely. Furthermore, we are recently witnessing increasing tensions among feminist groups, especially at the intersection of LGBTIQ+ and feminist activism. Such tensions also reverberate in complex ways among survivors and their supporters, creating discursive polarisations and further emotional burden on survivors. While our participants shared their experiences regarding such tensions, we chose to leave out such quotations in this article due to the risk of disrupting the anonymity of our participants.

As two feminist academics, although we did not know our participants individually, we followed their stories online and felt part of the solidarity created around their experiences. However, we also witnessed how they were attacked, disbelieved, and discredited in online spaces. We realise how these adverse reactions could be traumatising both for us as the researchers and for the survivors. In fact, this was evident when some of the women we approached for their participation in the study refused to take part stating that their online disclosure was re-traumatising for them. Thus, we employ a conceptual position where we neither glorify our participants' stories as stories of 'success' and 'justice' nor undervalue their accounts regarding empowering potentials of online disclosures.

Furthermore, Powell (2015: 19) addresses a 'danger' in conceptualising online disclosure as 'informal justice' as 'it . . . downplays the responsibility of the state to take action'. Similarly, although we argue that online disclosure could enable survivors to 'achieve' a sense of informal justice to a certain extent, we do not suggest online platforms as 'substitute' avenues for the criminal justice system as we strongly believe the responsibility of the state and legal system in taking action and providing justice to survivors.

Methods

Participants and recruitment

Six Turkish-speaking women who disclosed their experiences of gender-based violence on social media (Twitter and/or Facebook) were interviewed. For the recruitment purposes, the authors identified and reached out to eight women through their public social media profiles. During the initial contact, an invitation letter describing the study aims and objectives as well as the conditions of participation was sent. Four out of eight women who were invited to take part in the study were recruited during this initial invitation process. Two other women were referred by a participant after her interview process was completed, and they were invited to the study through email. After potentially agreeing to participate in the study, a detailed information letter and consent form were sent to all participants via email. Upon receiving their consent and signature, the interview dates and times were scheduled. Ethical approval of this study was obtained from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) in April 2021.

We chose not to advertise our study publicly and did not create an open call for study participation because we anticipated the risk of finding ourselves as targets of trolling and backlash attacks. Our concern was based on the increasing 'anti-feminist resistance' in Turkey in the recent years, especially issues around the Istanbul Convention and women's rights (Eslen-Ziya, 2022). Although this limited our chances to reach out to more women and, thus, restricted the generalisability of our findings, due to the rich and diverse content of the interviews, we still consider our data adequate to make meaningful contributions in relation to our research goals.

Data collection

Online individual interviews were conducted via Zoom. The interviews were semi-structured with a duration of 50 minutes to 2 hours; both authors were present. At the start of the interviews, the authors explained the conditions of participation and asked for consent to start audio-recording. All the interviews were conducted in Turkish and transcribed verbatim by the authors. The participants' personal information was removed from the data during the transcription process. After the coding and analysis of the interviews, the quotations included in this article were translated

from Turkish to English, and each participant was given a pseudonym.

The interviews included open-ended questions regarding women's reasons for choosing to reveal their experiences online, their expectations from the disclosures, and the consequences afterwards. This article specifically focuses on women's reasoning and decision-making and seeks answers to what extent their needs and expectations have been met.

Ethical considerations

Participation in studies about gender-based violence includes certain risks for the emotional safety of participants. Our research did not focus on the participants' experiences of violence; thus, the interviews did not include any questions regarding these potentially traumatic memories. However, we still considered that revealing their experiences of online disclosure, particularly talking about the negative consequences, would be emotionally overwhelming for them. Studies suggest that utilisation of 'trauma- and violence- informed' approaches in research would prevent such harm and, furthermore, would create beneficial outcomes for participants (i.e. speaking about one's experiences without being judged or blamed, opportunity to help out others through sharing one's experiences) (Baker et al., 2020; Lalonde et al., 2020). Based on such approaches, to minimise potential harms, we discussed such risks with the participants, explicitly stated that their emotional safety was a priority, and framed their consent as an ongoing process. We also constantly monitored and checked their distress levels during the interviews, used strength-based, non-judgemental language, and provided a non-directive conversational space to facilitate their engagement with the interviews.

Ensuring the anonymity of our participants was another critical concern. Their stories were public. This became an ethical challenge because we realised that many parts of the experiences that they shared in the interviews could easily expose their identities. Thus, we were cautious about choosing the information we would provide in this article, like deciding which quotations to use or what background information to include. Under these circumstances, we omitted many potentially informative parts from their stories. Similarly, for the same reason, we could not provide full demographic details except a partial summary.

We were aware that two authors being present during the interviews might influence the power dynamics between researchers and participants, yet we believed our different academic backgrounds would outweigh this risk. As we are academics working in related but different areas of research – specifically, one in digital sociology and feminist activism and the other in gender-based violence and women's health, we considered that via meeting our participants together, we would complement each other. In fact, we experienced the advantages of co-interviewing as it allowed us to grasp many aspects of our participants' stories that we would normally miss if the interviews were done individually. This experience is also in line with the previous literature on 'collaborative co-interviewing' (i.e. Redman-MacLaren et al., 2014; Rosenblatt, 2012; Velardo and Elliott, 2021), which shows that 'having multiple interviewers present can maximise probing opportunities, redistribute power . . . [and] bring diverse perspectives . . . to interviews' (Velardo and Elliott, 2021: 6).

The translation process was another critical issue that would bring ethical challenges (Clark et al., 2017). We followed a communicative, meaning-based approach rather than literal verbatim translation during the translation process. It means we focused on the 'reconstruction of

meaning, sense, context and ideas' within the quotations (Feldermann and Hiebl, 2019: 251). We used a three-step approach to ensure that no meaning or contextual information was altered or lost during the process. First, we translated the quotes individually. Then, we compared our translations to each other and discussed any differences. After this cross-check procedure, we also re-translated the English versions of the quotes from English to Turkish and compared these re-translated quotations to the original ones. These steps enabled us to achieve semantic accuracy as well as to represent the meanings in the quotations adequately.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used for the data analysis. As a flexible qualitative analysis tool for identifying and interpreting the shared meanings, processes, and patterns throughout the data, with aims to produce well-defined answers to particular questions identified during the research process. Regarding the present study, we identified and explored participants' processes of decision-making and the resulting experiences in relation to informal justice seeking.

Data coding was done through a qualitative analysis software programme, NVivo. A six-step data analysis strategy (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was followed. The first phase started through the data collection process and included developing preliminary insights and interpretations based on the 'observational and casual' understanding of the narratives (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 61). During this phase, we mainly explored issues around justice and empowerment and focused on the reasons for and consequences of disclosures. We generated our first tentative codes, such as 'having voice', 'finding support', or 'experiencing secondary violence'. During the next two steps, the transcribed narratives were coded more systematically. First, semantic codes were created based on the participants' descriptions of the events and processes. Then, we followed a more conceptual level of coding, and the initial codes were reorganised according to their frequencies and meanings. We separated the stories as 'before disclosure-reasons and processes' and 'after disclosure-consequences'. Codes such as 'inefficient justice mechanisms', 'demanding justice', 'seeking to be heard' were generated as 'before disclosure' codes. Regarding processes after disclosures, we first separated the narratives into 'positive' (i.e. 'digital solidarities', 'achieving a sense of justice', 'helping out others') and 'negative' (i.e. 're-victimization', 'digital vulnerabilities') consequences and developed the codes based on these broad categories. The next two steps involved the review of these codes and then the process of creating themes based on the identified conceptual understanding of the data. The boundaries and specific characteristics of the themes were determined, and it was made sure that each theme had a particular focus, was relevant to the research objectives, and conveyed a distinct essential meaning shared through the data. The writing phase was identified as the last step of analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006), through which we aimed to represent the women's stories cohesively in their fullness.

We followed each step of analysis independently, apart from the first preliminary interpretation and the writing phases. At the end of each phase, we worked together to determine whether there was enough consistency between our analyses. We discussed these inconsistencies until a consensus between us was achieved.

Findings

Four core themes, 'sharing the burden with others', 'demanding voice, recognition, and solidarity', 'preventing the offenders', and 'justice and its costs', were identified in the narratives. These themes addressed what justice meant for our participants, how they tried to achieve it through online disclosures, and what consequences they experienced after the disclosures.

'I do not want to live with this unfair burden': Sharing the burden with others

Injustice was experienced as an emotional burden. The participants stated that their act of disclosure was a type of informal complaint and thus a call for justice to remove this burden. Four of them reported that they made formal complaints before the online disclosure and fought for a long time for their rights during this process without receiving the outcome they wanted. For them, the online disclosures became inevitable as they felt constantly failed by the institutional processes.

Sevda stated that after going through several years of an onerous formal complaint process with no effective results, she chose online disclosure as her 'last resort' of seeking and ensuring justice. She defined it as a 'refusal of an unfair burden':

I saw that the justice did not work in sexual harassment cases. I think this is the main path that led people to online disclosures. As the processes of justice did not work, and disclosure was my only tool . . . You try a lot of things, formal investigations, third-party investigators etc., but it still does not work. In the very first formal report after my complaint, it was written "she perceived" . . . I even went to the police, they said "we cannot consider this as sexual harassment" because I did not have enough evidence. If it is the case then, you do not want to live with the burden anymore, I did not want to be crushed under this unfair burden; and it was a refusal, I refused to be under this burden.

Esra described a similar process when her expectations of justice were also not met through formal complaint mechanisms. She explained how she chose to disclose her reactions to the injustices she faced:

When you try to solve this within your institution . . . or when you go to others working with you to get advice or support, it becomes like, when women are exposed to physical violence by their husbands . . . the police says "this is a family affair, do not file a complaint, this is your husband, make peace", it was the same thing happened to me. "Do not make a big fuss about it, let us to talk to him, he will not do this again". It was just enough to hear these, nothing changed for years, so I started to become public about it.

In the absence of efficient formal justice processes, online disclosure is suggested as an alternative path for seeking justice (Fileborn, 2014, 2017; Powell, 2015). Correspondingly, the narratives above show how seeking justice through institutional processes and procedures created more injustices in women's lives and that they perceived online disclosure as a way of counteracting

their experiences of invalidation, disbelief, or belittlement. Relatedly, making their stories public through online disclosures is seen as a way of challenging victim-blaming public assumptions about gender-based violence, thus creating a 'counter-cultural public sphere' (Fileborn, 2017; 1483) to tell their stories as they wish and seek a supportive community (O'Neill, 2018; Powell, 2015; Salter, 2013).

The following narrative also exemplifies that online disclosure could be actively used to create public attention to make the judicial responses more effective and increase the chance of getting justice:

After I filed a complaint, everything was so slow, everything was kind of stopped, but I had some evidence and needed to move fast, but I think there was some barriers there, I suspected that they would cover the case up. So, in social media, when there is public pressure, things are getting faster, I wanted to do it in front of the public, I want to make my case public to make it work. (Simge)

Thus, as she was afraid that nothing good would come out of her court case, becoming public about her story of victimisation was hoped to create 'public pressure' on the court and facilitate her access to justice. This is also reflected in Salter's (2013) work, illustrating how generating online support networks would positively influence court outcomes for victims – although not in all cases. Furthermore, online campaigns against gender-based injustices are shown to be effective in influencing legal and political processes in Turkey (Şener, 2021).

'It was a scream to be heard': Demanding voice, recognition, and solidarity

Being forced into silence and not gaining recognition or support from others were described as some of the main motivators for the online disclosures. Barriers to formal justice, and not being taken seriously by others, left them with a feeling of abandonment and as having no voice – in contrast to the voice of the offenders. Hence, the disclosures were made to break that forced silence by demanding voice and solidarity. For instance, in Irmak's experience, the feeling of anger with a strong wish to disrupt the idealised, 'fake' public image of the offender was a motivation for the disclosure:

The emotional side of it. . . the trauma caused by the violence I experienced and the anger of not being able to say a word about it. It was so unfair. You know what this person did to you, but you see, when you look at your Twitter, you see this person in your timeline, socialising with other women with his fake feminist persona, you see that his writings are being promoted a lot. . . This creates a lot of anger. By disclosing, I want this person to take responsibility of what he has done to me, and others to acknowledge that.

This quotation exemplifies that 'offender accountability' could be a crucial 'justice need' for survivors (Daly, 2017; Fileborn, 2017; Loney-Howes et al., 2022). In addition, as noted by Herman (2005: 585), 'acknowledgement of harm' and 'validation from the community' is illustrated as central to the sense of justice and well-being.

Relatedly, our participants emphasised their need for having a voice and being treated with dignity by their communities became the context of their decision to disclose. Esra explained how the current political atmosphere in the country resonated with her struggle to make her voice heard:

It was the last thing consolidated my decision, Istanbul Convention, that made me very angry and brought me to a breaking point . . . I said "enough". I had this friend who said to me, "I do not believe you. You are lying. It is all in your head". People were silent. They were ignoring my complaints. You know, Sara Ahmed, she says "What is complaint? It is a cry and a shout". I wanted to scream. It was a scream to be heard. I wanted people to hear and understand. (Esra)

She seems to situate her story within these negative and in most ways oppressive circumstances occurring in Turkey, where women are left alone and not believed. Thus, her act of disclosing can be interpreted as a practice through which the personal and political agency meet. Similarly, Sevda underlined that revealing her experiences online was a way of performing agency:

I am not a victim, I do not accept this identity, I experienced this, but I am a successful young person, I am much more than being a victim. I also wanted to say this, to show that I am more than what happened to me. (Sevda)

McGlynn and Westmarland (2019: 28) notes that justice is about 'being valued as a whole person in society, not just as a victim, survivor or piece of evidence . . . belonging in society, being recognized, being treated with dignity, having a voice'. Thus, through 'speaking out', our participants wanted their stories to be heard, recognised, and understood, and, in this way, to reclaim their self-respect.

They also highlighted their wish to create a collective space for solidarity, to oppose the forced silence and secrecy imposed on them. They wanted their cases to be encouraging for other survivors to raise their voices and speak about their experiences of violence openly and also to find allies for their own cause and make others feel supported:

I wanted this to be known by others, I expected to find people saying, "We understand you, we are here for you", like an online hug maybe . . . And I wanted to say, "I am experiencing this, and it is not easy, but I am not giving up, you also experience similar things and I know you are not giving up too", I just wanted to give a message of solidarity. (Deniz)

He [the offender in another case different from hers] is a very well-known man, respected by others; when she revealed what happened, people said, "How can you say these bad things about this person?". But she owned her story. . . I wanted to write about my experiences to support her and I hoped that some others would come out and speak about their experiences too . . . Because otherwise you shared this behind closed doors and like what this man did to me, it stays hidden. (Filiz)

Fileborn (2014: 44) argues that naming violence through online disclosures 'transforms an individual harm to a collective one and provides the impetus for further political action'. Similarly, our

findings show that disclosures are perceived as a powerful form of online activism through which survivors wish to empower and mobilise each other and create a collective identity (O'Neill, 2018).

'How can I stop him?': Preventing the offenders

One common underlying reason reported for the online disclosures was a desire to stop further victimisation in their lives and prevent the offenders from hurting others in the future. For our participants, in connection with their wish to create safety from violence both for themselves and for other women, this was a way of ensuring informal justice. Simgé commented how her realisation that there could be other victims became her main motivation to reveal her story:

When you see that the perpetrator is so comfortable with his acts even after your complaint, it becomes easy to guess that there are other victims too. Because, for example, I was working there for 13 days, I experienced such a thing on the 13th day and the first reaction I got was to be silenced with money, he offered me money. This means that he did it before and there could be times it worked. He threatened me, so it means that he knew that he could silence women with threats. I thought he must be 'rehabilitated', he must be removed from the community, so this thought gave me strength and I shared it on Twitter.

Sevda similarly stated that preventing the offender from repeating the same actions and reaching out to other potential victims and warning them was one of the main reasons why she disclosed—she aimed to stop the 'cycle' of violence:

How can I prevent this man from repeating this pattern? Disclosure comes as an answer here. I remember that I did hear so many things about this man before, before starting to work with him, like gossip, but I did not care. And he also tried to manipulate me about this gossip, he was aware of it, he was telling me "They are trying to cancel me, defame me" etc. I cannot believe I did not care but it is what it is. And I knew that after me there would be other women; it was a cycle. And later I thought so many women can behave like me, they can be deceived, manipulated with the same tactics. But a public disclosure . . . I thought it would be more effective than gossip. I thought I could stop him in this way.

One way of stopping the offenders was to put an end to their hypocrisy and prevent the deception they created in the minds of others:

I realised that there was a big contradiction, that is, the person I was in contact with was someone who described himself as a pro-feminist man . . . who could talk comfortably about violence, harassment, such issues. The very same person inflicts psychological violence on me . . . "You cannot do this, you cannot deceive people, women", that's what I had in mind. (Irmak)

Some women also reported that they chose disclosure to stop further harm to themselves coming from the perpetrators:

I received a letter, it was so disturbing, like, telling me that they were watching me, so like, I should not talk about women, I should not talk about violence, etc. My decision to share all these, it was like saying "Leave me alone!" "Do not harass me anymore!" Receiving that letter was a trigger. (Deniz)

These findings support the previous studies that highlight the prevention of further violence by the offenders as an underlying motivation of why survivors seek justice, formal or informal (Clark, 2015; Fileborn, 2014, 2017; McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019; Salter, 2013). Survivors wish to see their offenders punished for their wrongdoings, denounced, and condemned at a community level and 'to protect the broader community and work towards the prevention of violence' (Fileborn, 2017; 1485). In this sense, as noted by Clark (2015) and supported by our findings, for survivors to feel justice, consequences should be 'purposeful'; it should convey a critical message to offenders that violence is not something to be accepted and tolerated.

'It was both worth it and not': Justice and its costs

When we asked our participants whether they felt that their expectations have been met through disclosures and justice has been ensured, their answers mostly indicated a mix of ambivalent feelings and thoughts. They said that they were able to own their stories and their voice through disclosures, and they felt empowered because of the solidarity and support they received in these online platforms. However, they also highlighted that some of their expectations were not met and that there were times that they felt that the disclosures created more harm than good in their lives. Still, in the end, despite these negative outcomes, they all highlighted that they did not regret their decision to disclose. The achievement of solidarity was described as a major gain in their lives. The following subthemes 'justice through solidarity' and 'barriers to justice' explain these opposite but simultaneous outcomes of online disclosures.

Justice through solidarity. Being believed and validated, receiving support, and supporting others were described as the crucial gains achieved through the online disclosures in women's lives. In contrast to the isolation and silence dominating their lives before the disclosures, they all emphasised that the demanded voice and recognition was gained, which then helped them to overcome their experiences of victimisation.

Esra emphasised that being heard and believed was what she expected the most, and this was very reassuring for her: 'The only thing I wanted was being heard and I have been heard, I have been supported. It felt good'. She also added that even just writing about what happened was healing by itself:

I really felt relieved after I wrote it. My body was so relieved. Before this, when I tried to talk about it, my body was becoming too tight, I could not talk about the details, I was not able to tell the full story. Things changed when I wrote everything plainly . . . I just wanted to scream, and I screamed. Everybody should know this.

Although emotional recovery is not considered as the sole purpose of justice seeking (Daly, 2017), it seems that telling their stories to an online audience, 'screaming' about what happened, creates

an 'emotional catharsis' (Fileborn, 2017: 1493) or transformation. Thus, disclosing such painful experiences and encountering support and validation rather than disbelief and blame seems to create a sense of healing (Mendes et al., 2018).

The online disclosures also helped the participants to connect with other women who had similar experiences, which created a sense of purpose in their lives. Irmak expressed that being able to talk about what happened and spreading these conversations in online platforms created a real difference in the lives of others as well as hers:

I felt connected with women who have had much more difficult experiences . . . So many wrote to me, they told me . . . how reading what I wrote created a difference for them, it sometimes helped them to realise something, to talk about what happened to them, maybe to seek answers . . . this was good for me, helped me to feel better, and it was also good for others. This space of conversation we have, it is getting bigger and bigger.

Filiz also revealed that being part of a supportive network after the disclosure and being able to inspire and encourage other women – including her daughter – were the positive outcomes of the online disclosure in her life:

When you contacted me, regarding your question, "empowering aspects", I thought "What empowering aspects?" etc. But when I think about it, yes, speaking all these with my daughter at home . . . she will be more aware of these things. Getting the chance to know so many women . . . knowing that I have established a network to support others. All these make me feel very good.

These findings are quite critical in the sense that they show how, for survivors, the experience of justice goes beyond individual needs (Clark, 2015; Fileborn, 2017; McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019). Online disclosures become a consciousness-raising tool for empowering communities and enabling a societal transformation towards achieving non-violence (Bogen et al., 2022; Fileborn, 2014, 2017; Loney-Howes et al., 2022; Mendes et al., 2018). This also resonates with social justice concepts through which justice is defined beyond an individual experience, indicating broader processes of education, prevention, and transformation to create equal and just societies (Clark, 2015; Fileborn, 2017; McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019).

In terms of consequences of the disclosures for the offenders, some participants underlined that the disclosures created justice in the sense that the offenders partially lost their credibility and support. In Filiz's story, an important consequence of online disclosure was that the offender's employment was terminated. Despite the ambivalence she felt, she experienced it as bringing justice to her case:

I was happy and sad. It is a scary thing. His reputation, his income, his family, etc. But there is also my reputation. This is also my only income. So, this feeling of guilt will always be within me, but this is justice, he should not have done it, he is responsible for what happened.

Simge also explained that finding supportive people and seeing her offender lacking the resources and support that she had ended up with mitigated her sense of isolation and insecurity. This, for her, made justice more accessible and became a satisfactory consequence of the disclosure:

It was like he was a powerful man with lots of resources, he had contacts. But now there are so many people who are willing to help me. There are 18 lawyers now involved in my court proceedings, they all found me after the disclosure. While I was afraid that people would support him, during the first trial after the disclosure I realised that my offender was so lonely. I am surrounded by people, and this gives me a feeling of confidence, security. I now believe that the justice will be served. I am enjoying it.

Herman (2005) indicated community actions denouncing the harm that the offenders created to be critically important for survivors. These actions affirm 'the solidarity of the community . . . and transferred the burden of disgrace from victim[s] to offender[s]' (Herman, 2005: 585). Our results similarly show that online disclosures can be effective for survivors to receive support and recognition from their communities and ensure some level of 'offender accountability'. These processes are shown to 'traverse both online and offline spheres' (Wood et al., 2019: 387), create a 'real-life' difference in survivors' lives, and help them build a collective sense of solidarity, all of which then contribute to their sense of justice (Chowdhury and Fileborn, 2020; Fileborn, 2014, 2017; Loney-Howes, 2020; Mendes et al., 2018; O'Neill, 2018; Powell, 2015; Salter, 2013).

Barriers to justice. The participants stated that the negative reactions they received from known and unknown others, or the indifference they encountered, made them feel disappointed and vulnerable. They said that there were times when they focused significantly on these challenging aspects, which made it hard to perceive the positive outcomes. Filiz, for example, shared one of these moments:

I focused on the painful sides a bit more. I remember things like, he slandered me, he intentionally made false accusations. Or a friend of mine, she wanted to meet. I thought she would support me. Instead, she told me that "I spoke to him [to the offender], I want you to know that his life is destroyed". So, I did a bad thing, I need to feel guilty.

Deniz also underlined the ongoing injustice during the process as she felt that she lost too much and gained only a little. She experienced systematic online harassment and stalking carried out by the offender and the people around him:

Me, the liar. You see constant tweeting about yourself full of insults, blaming. I felt that those were forcing me to keep silent . . . Even now, every time when I look at myself, I am like searching for failures . . . These stole from my life, from my time . . . It is a very big injustice. It is dirty.

The participants explained that being disbelieved and feeling that they had failed to make the offenders accountable for their actions hindered their sense of justice:

The sense of justice, what can I say, whether it enabled justice or not, I do not know . . . people questioned my experiences, shared their disbelief publicly. I received no apology, or there was an apology, but it was like a fake one, just to satisfy people. He insidiously supported people who attacked me. (Irmak)

Similarly, it was reported that the powerful social network that the offenders had was the most challenging barrier to justice as the women were not believed or encountered a thick wall of silence. The quotations below exemplify this process:

Emotional connections precede too many things, so this is probably the main obstacle to justice -personal connections, networks, or perhaps sentimentality. I mean "He is our friend, he cannot do it", "He is my colleague, he cannot do such things". It is a double standard . . . When it is done by someone you do not know, you can react easily, but otherwise, you keep silent, or you do not believe. (Sevda)

Some others were silent, I was expecting it . . . And the attacks. . . like gossip about me, what a lunatic I am, etc. The sad thing was that these people were supporting other disclosures. So, you see, it should be someone they do not know . . . you talk about women's rights, but you do not support a friend of yours. (Esra)

These experiences address that seeking justice through online disclosures has many drawbacks for survivors, which is not very different from what women experience when they seek justice through formal mechanisms. Our findings confirmed that 'the justice gap' (Fileborn, 2017: 1498) was still there, experienced by our participants and informal justice trajectories are not straightforward and without its challenges. Justice is always experienced as partial, and so is healing and safety (Fileborn, 2017; Loney-Howes et al., 2022; Salter, 2013; Wood et al., 2019). It seems that online justice seeking may include risks of further harm and, thus, ensuring a sense of safety may be challenging.

Conclusion

Alongside the barriers to justice and the secondary violence experienced after disclosing online, our data shows that the women we interviewed formed feminist counter spaces. By making their experiences of assault visible to a larger public, they created a healing community. As suggested by the literature (i.e. Fileborn, 2017; Loney-Howes, 2020; Mendes et al., 2018; O'Neill, 2018; Wood et al., 2019), we also illustrated that online disclosure acted as means for achieving an alternative justice satisfaction, partial if not full. In Turkey where the convention to combat violence against women was debated and later abandoned, they felt they needed to voice their experiences. Once they disclosed, they said that despite the challenges they experienced, they nevertheless felt heard and acknowledged, and this was in line with the existing literature. Hence, for our participants, such an online mobilisation became the very resource that created a narrative of strength and agency and brought forth a sense of justice.

McGlynn and Westmarland (2019: 197) describe justice as a 'pluralistic experience' which involves survivors' interests for voice, validation, participation, consequences, and connectedness. This is in line with what we showed in our study. Our participants described justice as a process with interconnected meanings, through which they sought for and demanded voice, recognition, accountability, and solidarity. In contrast to formal complaints where our participants felt none of these needs were met, seeking informal justice through online platforms enabled them to satisfy their diverse justice needs, at least partially.

This also brings us to the conclusion that survivors' needs are much more complex than simply cancelling or punishing the perpetrators. Rather than seeking for 'cancellation', we showed that disclosing on social media was experienced as a transformative process to practice agency and create a network of solidarity based on shared interests. Prevention was also identified as crucial. Through their stories, they connected with other women who have similar experiences and used their newly acquired resources to support and mobilise them. Overall, considering the rise of a backlash against online feminist activism, our findings address the importance of looking for and understanding survivors' accounts regarding online disclosures and seeking informal justice through online platforms.

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