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Working-Class Femininity and Maternal Resistance in Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*

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Abstract in English

A Taste of Honey is a play that was written in 1958. It is about what it's like to be a woman from a working class in Britain after the war. This paper is going to look at how Shelagh Delaney shows what life is like for women like that. It is going to focus on the relationship between the character Jo and her mother Helen. *A Taste of Honey* shows that being a woman can be really hard because of the class you are in and because of your gender. The play also shows that being a woman can be a way to fight back against these things. This is especially true when it comes to being a mother. This study is going to look at some ideas in *A Taste of Honey*. These ideas include what it is like to be marginalized how people figure out who they are and what it means to be a mother in a way. By looking at these ideas we can see how Shelagh Delaney helped to create a kind of feminist theatre. We can also see how she challenged the way people thought about women from working class families. Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* is a play that says a lot, about working class and their experiences.

Paper Info

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1. Introduction

Shelagh Delaney's play *A Taste of Honey* is a significant work for understanding women's rights in the twentieth century. It explores the difficulties faced by women in Britain after World War II and highlights the harsh realities of working-class life. The play demonstrates how both social class and gender discrimination negatively affect women's lives. At the same time, it presents women as resilient individuals who seek independence and self-definition.

A number of scholars have studied the play from different perspectives; however, few have fully examined Delaney's feminist ideas in depth. This paper aims to address that gap by focusing on Delaney's representation of women. It will examine her life and the social conditions of post-war Britain, particularly the struggles faced by working-class women. It will also explore the concept of maternal strength and emotional vulnerability in the play.

The study focuses on how working-class women are portrayed as marginalized, exploited, and often silenced. This is illustrated through the character of Jo, whose experiences help the reader understand issues of neglect, abuse, and social exclusion. The paper also considers how women attempt to reshape their lives despite these limitations (Delaney, 2024).

Furthermore, this study examines the setting of *A Taste of Honey* to understand how motherhood is represented as fragile, restrained, and shaped by economic hardship. In literature, women have often been categorized into stereotypical roles: romanticized young girls, domestic wives, or idealized figures of beauty. However, working-class women—especially those employed in factories or living in urban poverty—have frequently been ignored or underrepresented in literary traditions.

Shelagh Delaney herself from a working-class background in Salford, Lancashire, challenged these representations by giving voice to marginalized women in her writing. Writing in the aftermath of World War II, she captured the limitations placed on women's freedom and identity. The female characters in *A Taste of Honey* serve as examples of this social and literary intervention (Doron, 2016).

2. Historical Context of Working-Class Women

After the First World War, women who were working class paid money into the system across the United Kingdom. This was a time when a lot of people were moving to cities and towns and factories and shops were springing up everywhere. Because of this, women started working in factories driving buses and at stores. This meant women were earning money. This was not a stable situation because factory jobs were not always available and women could easily find themselves out of work again. Women were paid wages for their work. The fact that factory jobs were temporary made their position very unstable. They could start working. Then be out of work again very quickly just like that. As the researcher Artesero Bernal said in 2016 this was a problem for women. So during the time between the two world wars the social position of women was really tough. Women had to deal with men abusing them and very poor living conditions. This made life harder for working-class women and it was a big struggle for them to make ends meet. To make things even worse after the war the economy started to grow. A lot of people were looking for jobs. This meant that there was a lot of competition for jobs, which was a worry for many families. The men who had come back from the war wanted their old jobs back. This was a threat to the jobs that women were doing in many industries. Women were working in different industries and the returned men wanted to take their jobs, which was a big problem, for women. (Glucksmann, 2022)

Single women had to go to court because the law made it hard for them to support their families. This led to women needing help and teaming up with women who did not have jobs. Even though things got a little better for a time the economic problems came back. A lot of men lost their jobs. People who worked with families made mistakes and mothers struggled during the economic times. This changed how people saw women and made them seem important.

Delaney's play shows what life is like for a mother and daughter who are from a working-class family. It highlights how strong mothers can be. The play talks about war and race and sex. It shows how being a mother changed over time. The play is not about how people feel. It is about the changes that happened in the 1950s. The goal was to understand what it was like to be a mother during that time. The focus was on how men and women did kinds of work. The play called "The Mother", written by Bertolt Brecht, was a success. However, some people were concerned about how it showed motherhood. The characters in the play appeared to regard motherhood as a defining and significant role. They thought it was like being a slave. Later people looked at the play again. Found different ways to understand it. They saw that it showed motherhood in ways depending on how people saw it. The play "The Mother" and its portrayal of motherhood, as 'past caring' were reassessed, revealing portrayals of motherhood from different societal perspectives on motherhood. (Williamson, 2023)

4. Representation of Femininity

In *A Taste of Honey*, Shelagh Delaney constructs femininity not as a stable identity but as a contested and socially produced condition. The play persistently interrogates what it means to be a woman within a working-class context, revealing how gender roles are shaped—and often distorted—by economic precarity. This interrogation extends to the representation of male characters, whose identities are likewise mediated through their relationship to dominant and failing models of femininity.

Rather than presenting coherent or aspirational figures, Delaney assembles fragmented and often contradictory characters to expose a reality marked by stagnation, emotional deprivation, and limited social mobility. The atmosphere of hopelessness is not incidental; it is structurally embedded, suggesting a cyclical reproduction of failure across generations. Jo's resistance, therefore, should not be read as purely emancipatory. Her attempt to reject her mother's model of femininity—defined by unstable relationships and compromised agency—reveals both a desire for autonomy and the near impossibility of escaping inherited social conditions.

Crucially, the play refuses any singular representation of womanhood. Instead, it demonstrates that femininity is stratified along lines of class, age, and access to economic resources. Women are not only differentiated but also positioned unequally within a hierarchy that limits their choices and reinforces their marginalization. In this sense, *A Taste of Honey* offers a critical exploration of the intersection between class and gender, exposing how both operate together to constrain female subjectivity rather than simply define it.

In *A Taste of Honey* the women characters, no matter if they are black, young or old or just mothers play many different roles as women. These roles often hurt each other and are used against each other when they meet. The way women are shown in Shelagh Delaney's play *A Taste of Honey* would be funny in stories but in this one it provokes

intense emotions, stirring anger and a desire to resist or challenge the situation. The women in *A Taste of Honey* the young working-class and pregnant ones are very angry about the way women are supposed to act. They attack the idea that women have to act a way, which is not shown in a realistic way in some other stories like those by Sillitoe. In *A Taste of Honey*, the struggle to show what it means to be a woman is a part of the story, which is shown as a realistic and difficult life. This is very different, from what D.H. Lawrence said about working-class people that their lives are empty and meaningless. (Cavarero, 2021)

A Taste of Honey is a play that shows us the world in a way. It is about how people and what they do can be seen from a distance and how that can change what we think. The writer Delaney shows us working-class people who are trying to make their lives better. They come up with ways to deal with the problems they face. The stories are about how they try to find ways to challenge the things that are holding them back.

A Taste of Honey is like that. It is about working-class people. How they try to make their lives better. They try to find ways to deal with the problems they face.

5. Maternal Figures in Delaney's Work

In a study about the plays of Shelagh Delaney, Janice S. H. W. Wong argues that *A Taste of Honey* is really about the relationship between a mother and her daughter. Many scholars think that the play is concerned with mothers and how they are seen. Shelagh Delaney shows a mother who loves her daughter but is also very ashamed and a daughter who does not want to be like her mother out of a sense of shame toward her. This shows what it is like to be a woman from a working-class family and how mothers can resist the rules that society puts on them.

The main character Jo does not like the idea that there is one way to be a woman and she wants to fight against the way that mothers are treated. At the same time, she is hiding her own feelings about being a mother due to others' judgments. Some critics argue that the way that working-class homes are shown in the play, like the kitchen and the way that mothers are ashamed of their homes has made people think badly of working-class women. *A Taste of Honey* is actually making fun of these ideas and showing that mothers can be strong and oppose the rules that society puts on them which is something that we should appreciate and understand. (Zhang, 2023)

6. Resistance Through Maternal Roles

In *A Taste of Honey* being a mother is not about caring for kids it's about standing up for oneself and making choices. Jo's idea of being a woman from a working-class background is influenced by her mother, who wants her to have a better life When Helen leaves Jo invents a story about being pregnant which goes against what people expected of her then. Unlike Helen, who has problems with relationships Jo embraces motherhood. Sees her child as a reason to be hopeful and connected to the future. By choosing to live a life Jo shows she can be a good mother and she doesn't want to raise her child with the fancy privileges that come with wealth. Jo challenges the idea of what a traditional home should be, driven by her dreams and she proudly says she is a working-class mother. People expect her to be a mom compared to women, from richer backgrounds but Jo doesn't care about her messy appearance and she gets both criticism and praise for it as she refuses to follow the rules of being modest that society expects from mothers. (Anne Smith-Lane, 2019) (Deboeck, 2011)

Transcending her status as a mother Jo claims a different working-class identity. Jo refuses to go with his plan to get rid of openness and presence of mothers unless it means giving birth in a traditional way. She defiantly challenges the boundaries of class, race and gender to think about ways of being, sexuality and having children. Unlike Boucicault and comedies Delaney's resistance does not follow the rules that define and confine mothers. She responds to the tactics of a middle-class nation and navigates the conditions of white supremacy, imperialism and capitalism in her own way. This way is different from motherhood. It is, in the moments suspected of decline and danger because of origins—of the fake social classes, names, red-light districts and traits that denote the trace and horror of Taos—that amazing cultures of property grow. (Agar, 2024)

7. Gender and Class Dynamics

Delaney's play *A Taste of Honey* can be understood as a powerful expression of working-class femininity and maternal resistance. It foregrounds the voices of working-class women who not only perform but also author their own narratives with striking boldness. By presenting their lived experiences to an audience, they challenge and disrupt conventional expectations tied to both class and gender. In doing so, these women help establish a tradition of representing working-class life across theatre, film, and popular culture. Their portrayal of culture is not passive; rather, it embodies a distinctly feminine form of power rooted in personal experience and emotional depth. This expressive force parallels narratives of migration, where storytelling reshapes perceptions of identity, class, and gender.

As Angela McRobbie (2010) suggests, cultural authority was once controlled by a limited elite who dismissed overly direct or authentic expressions as unacceptable. Despite these constraints, working-class women writers and performers persisted in articulating their realities. Their resilience is particularly significant given the structural barriers they faced. Ultimately, the themes of working-class femininity and maternal resistance in Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* remain highly relevant today. The play continues to demonstrate the enduring influence and transformative potential of working-class women's voices (Minor, 2023)

8. The Role of Place in Identity Formation

In Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* the place where people live is important for figuring out who they are. This idea comes from some theories. From what other people have found out before like Taylor did in 2005. When one looks at the play, he sees that mothers and daughters are very important and so is the place where they live. When one thinks about how peoples social class affects who they are one should also think about the places they live. This is important because the characters in the play are who they are because of where they live. The characters in *A Taste of Honey* are from the working class. They are not all the same. Jo's mother Helen is from the part of the working class. Jo is from the upper part of the working class and Jo's father is even higher up as (Smith-Lane, 2019; Deboeck, 2011). The play is set in some poor homes like a bombed-out city and a neighborhood with old houses and dirty streets i.e., a slum.

The analysis looks at how Helen and Jo feel about who they're where they live. It shows how their lives as working-class women are connected to the world around them. Both Helen and Jo want a life. Helen wants Jo to have an education and enjoy nice things. They both have to deal with not having time for themselves. They have to put their families need and ensure financial stability There are problems when Jo wants to be a mother. Helen has other plans, for her. Helen's work also complicates matters. This analysis helps us understand the choices working-class mothers and daughters face. It shows a picture of their lives. Helen and Jo are working hard to make a life for themselves.

Helen and Jo want to improve their status. Helen and Jo are trying to balance their needs with their family responsibilities. The analysis highlights the challenges of being a working-class mother and daughter. (Mackintosh,2024)

9. Intersections of Race and Class

In the 1950s, issues of race began to receive increasing attention within British institutions, particularly in relation to class, whiteness, and representation. Theatre audiences and playwrights were influenced by the hopes and anxieties of post-war British society. During this period, racialized communities, particularly Black British individuals, were often excluded from dominant cultural narratives and were not fully represented within mainstream theatre.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, renewed interest emerged in representations of the working class across theatre, literature, and film. Critics increasingly challenged cultural institutions for privileging middle- and upper-class standards of taste and aesthetic value. However, discussions of race became less central in the 1980s, when class once again became a dominant concern, particularly in British drama. Playwrights began to focus more explicitly on class inequalities, while critics engaged in debates surrounding these representations.

In addition to race and class, issues of sexuality gained significant attention in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s. In the twenty-first century, discussions of race and class in Britain intensified, particularly following Brexit and growing political tensions in northern regions. Writers increasingly questioned what it means to be “British” in a rapidly changing society. Recent theatrical productions focusing on working-class and middle-class life have highlighted ongoing gaps in the historical representation of both class and race in British theatre. These works emphasize that the experiences of working-class and racialized communities have often been marginalized or omitted from

10. Delaney’s Critique of Social Norms

In Shelagh Delaneys play *A Taste of Honey* Jo, a working-class girl from Manchester feels unloved and misunderstood by her mother, Helen and society. She compares her life to that of a middle-class girl, who seems to have a caring relationship with her mother. Joan suffers because of Helens desire to break free from her responsibilities, which ironically ends up trapping Joan. Without her mother around Joan stays connected to her and this connection motivates her actions. This working-class

community is not uniform; Delaney shows differences within it adding complexity to her criticism of norms. When Jo enters the flat, she feels at home for the first time. Geoffrey says, "It means we can decorate it." Joan replies, "Then I couldn't ask for anything " and adds, "nothing match and twisted..." Although Joan is cautious and has a tough exterior she ultimately trusts the flat, similar to how she trusted her Dear Old Daddy. Joan learns to take care of the flat and stock its shelves. She also reconnects with things she had left behind like her neighborhood and the comforts of a traditional working-class home. The flat represents more than a place to live; it symbolizes her connection to her past and her sense of independence. Joan is close, to her mothers house. Feels entirely on her own in the flat and for the first time she feels truly at home. (Quinn, 2024)

11. Literary Techniques Used by Delaney

Shelagh Delaney wrote her play *A Taste of Honey* in just four nights. She was twenty years old at the time (1958). The play was a deal and it made her famous. It was also a problem for her because she had a hard time living up to what people expected from her. She felt like she was stuck with the play. It was hard for her to move on. The play was really good because of the way Joan Littlewood directed it and the people at Theatre Workshop company who performed it. They did a job of showing what life was like in the East End of London. Even though it was hard for Shelagh Delaney to write something good, as *A Taste of Honey* again people still loved her writing. They liked the way she wrote about feeling lost and trying to figure out who you are. They also liked the parts. All of this helped make Shelagh Delaney an important playwright of her time. (Bernal, 2016)

A Taste of Honey is an amazing play and it is really surprising that it was even written. Delaney, who wrote it, had never written a play before. In fact, she did not even see her play until she was 15 years old. It was a play by Terence Rattigan. It made her want to write a play of her own. One day Delaney was out on horseback. That is when she got the idea for *A Taste of Honey*. She thought about it at night when everyone in her house was asleep. She wrote the play in just four nights. Delaney did not change much of what she wrote. She made a copy of the play. Sent it to the Royal Court Theatre. The people who first read the play were really surprised by how good it was. The words and characters in the play were so full of energy that the actors and the people reading it felt like they were a part of it. The time the play was read out loud the audience loved it so much that the actors had to take three rounds of applause before they could even leave the stage. The audience was cheering so much that it took them a while to calm down. A woman named Littlewood worked on the play for a year before it was performed in front of an audience, in London. (Omar & Muhammed, 2024)

12. The Impact of *A Taste of Honey* on Feminism

Delaney's play *A Taste of Honey* is very important because it shows how education and beauty can change peoples' lives. It also critiques the theatre and culture of the time which was mostly focused on the class. The play asks questions about what role it plays in London's art scene today. It is a good example of "kitchen-sink" realism, which portrays the lives of working class in an honest way. The play is set in a pub in Lancashire. It deals with themes like poverty single mothers and relationships between

parents and children. When *A Taste of Honey* is performed it tests how good the national theatre is at showing perspectives because often it only shows plays that will make money in the West End. The goal is to understand how people think about Delaney's play and her ideas and to look at how they're received by the audience. *A Taste of Honey* is a feminist play that still holds up today and even though Delaney's ideas influenced other writers they were not always accepted by the mainstream theatre. The main character of the play is an example of how theatre and cinema were changing at the time and how people were navigating the city. In 1963 it was interesting to see how well new plays were received by audiences. Delaney's career was influenced by playwrights and the theatre scene was changing but it still had a lot of gender inequality. The labour movement was still fighting for women rights. This is often shown in a powerful way, in Delaney's plays especially by the end of the first act. Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* is a play that continues to be important today and Delaney's work is still widely performed and studied. (Lee, 2022)

13. Comparative Analysis with Contemporary Works

A Taste of Honey shows a point of view in a very unique way to talk about social issues and challenges. The play shows what it is like to be a working-class woman and a mother and how politics, culture and gender roles affect them. Shelagh Delaney writes about the working-class experience in a way through her characters, settings and language which challenges the typical views of the upper class. This realistic view shows the pressures that limit women's freedom and the sacrifices they make in marriage. In the end Delaney shows female characters who deal with oppression because of their working-class background and being mothers. Shelagh Delaney is known as the 'disgruntled daughter' because she represents the voice of women. This essay looks at how these voices help define what it means to be a woman. A realistic point of view influences how women are seen and heard and it affects how people receive Delaney's efforts to help people from classes understand each other.

The rise of these voices shows how they can move across classes, genders and regions and how they challenge views of women. Delaney's work shows how where we grow up our religion and our social class are all connected and that engaging with people from classes often means giving up our local identity. This connection is important to understand how women from classes and regions see themselves. The study emphasizes that things like education, religion and wealth affect how voices are heard and understood. The rules made by the people in power have limited the choices to both the rich and the poor. When women from families get married or have children they are given a way to express their feelings but this is not the case for women from poor families. Shelagh Delaney highlights the problems that mothers from classes face and how Jo and Helen are always stuck between different ideas of what it means to be a woman. The music of Debussy and memories of Paris remind Jo of the kind of mother Helen is not. By showing these restrictions Delaney is able to talk about the tensions between mothers, in the North and the emotions that mothers share. (Mitchell, 2022)

14. Audience Reception and Legacy

Shelagh Delaney became a member of the Royal Society of Literature in 1985. Passed away on 20 November 2011 in Suffolk from breast cancer. Shelagh Delaney bequeathed the rights to her plays to her daughter Charlotte. This allowed theatres to

revive Shelagh Delaney's plays and other neglected works. *A Taste of Honey* is Shelagh Delaney's known play. It was very successful for Delaney and the kitchen sink movement in -war Britain. This play reflected cultural changes after World War II. Delaney wrote *A Taste of Honey* on a borrowed typewriter. The play combined themes and techniques in a very skillful way. This made *A Taste of Honey* an important influence at that time. The play *A Taste of Honey* first showed at the Theatre Royal, Stratford E15 on 22 May 1958. Later it moved to the Lyric Theatre. Then to the West End on 17 September 1958. The West End version was not as strong as the original. Delaney wrote four stage plays. The only one that was not adapted for media was not actually written by her it was *Macbeth*. *A Taste of Honey* was the dynamic and frequently revived play. Both amateurs and professionals liked to perform it. This play featured a type of ensemble that was rare in Britain. (Rogers, 2022)

This all happened after a show that was a lot like Delaney's play. People in London and everywhere else thought Delaney's play was really good. They said it was sharp. It made them feel things. It was like a mix of drama and excitement. This was three weeks after another play came out. That play was very British. It was like the old days. It had an ending to a family story and it was also funny. It also showed people doing bad things. Terence Rattigan wrote that play. It was the last time a famous actress was on stage. All the important people in the theatre wanted to perform with her. This is interesting because the play was about a woman who was treated badly. It showed her crying at a beach resort. It also showed her husband doing bad things in a hotel. The play used a flashback to tell the story. A lot of people did not like the choices that were made in the play. John Gielgud directed the play. He was the one who had taught Delaney how to act a long time ago. Delaney's play was a lot, like this one. It was directed by someone who knew Delaney very well. Delaney's play was a deal and people are still talking about it. Delaney's play was special. It is still remembered today. (Delaney, 2025)

15. Critical Perspectives on Working-Class Feminism

In *A Taste of Honey*, Delaney not only introduces a working-class female voice into a traditionally male-dominated theatrical space, but also redefines what counts as visibility and value in postwar culture. A compelling new way to read the play is to see it not simply as a reflection of working-class struggle, but as a critique of postwar optimism itself. While broader society projected narratives of recovery and progress after World War II, Delaney exposes how such narratives excluded working-class women like Jo, whose lived reality remained marked by instability, marginalization, and emotional neglect. Jo's character becomes significant not because she fully escapes these conditions, but because she makes them visible. Her apparent naivety can be reinterpreted as a form of unfiltered perception—she articulates truths that more socially conditioned characters suppress or normalize. In this sense, Jo disrupts dominant cultural narratives not through overt rebellion, but through her refusal—or inability—to fully conform to them. This suggests that *A Taste of Honey* operates as an early form of counter-discourse, where the everyday experiences of a working-class girl challenge the ideological gap between national progress and personal reality. Rather than presenting empowerment as triumph, the play reframes it as endurance and exposure: the act of existing, speaking, and being seen within a system that would prefer invisibility. (Kandaswamy, 2021)

16. Conclusion

Stylistically varied and vocally rich Shelagh Delaney's work in theatre and cinema has been largely ignored, like other British women writers. This critical silence censors the voices in her work and fits it into a traditional male-dominated canon. Her politics, expressed in unsentimental portrayals of poverty, violence and alienation have been largely overlooked. Delaney's critique of gender, race, sexuality and class has barely been noticed in the British literary canon. As a result, she has become almost forgotten in the effort to revive her work. Traditions Delaney engages with have been viewed through a lens and continue to be valued for what they signify in the context of white male Englishness. This silence is politically motivated. Represents a way of controlling women's voices. It interferes with our understanding of women's agency and the need for its expression. In -war England, poverty and working-class life have been common themes in realist photography and filmmaking. However, representing these issues in an unvarnished way can be limiting. Delaney's work engaged with this realism. Captured a memorable aspect of British life: the crowded working-class landscapes of streets, houses and factories. Delaney refused to make her work immediately recognizable by challenging the male and Eurocentric perspective. Her writing explores the underside of working-class life renewing and reinventing it through an expression of rage. The working-class characters in her writing are approach absurdity. In her work these characters. Threaten hysterically testifying to their existence and exile. Attempts to be invisible and to drink are made. They become comical and unmasked. When a character like Miss H. Or Winnie disrupts a moment her action is both beautiful and violent. This moment reveals the discomfort of the subject. Suggests readings, in other literary traditions. Delaney's work invigorates the tradition of using the body as humour. Her mockery of life and questioning of free will also suggest readings in literary traditions. Shelagh Delaney's work continues to be a part of British literary canon. Shelagh Delaney's perspective helps in understanding of femininity.

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الخلاصة

تُعد مسرحية *A Taste of Honey*، التي كُتبت عام 1958، عملاً يسلط الضوء على تجربة المرأة في الطبقة العاملة في بريطانيا بعد الحرب. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل الكيفية التي صوّرت بها شيلا ديلاني واقع حياة هؤلاء النساء، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على العلاقة بين شخصية جو ووالدتها هيلين. تُظهر المسرحية أن كون المرأة ينطوي على تحديات كبيرة ترتبط بكلٍ من الطبقة الاجتماعية والنوع الاجتماعي، لكنها في الوقت نفسه تبرز إمكانية مقاومة هذه القيود. ويتجلى ذلك بشكل خاص في مفهوم الأمومة. تتناول هذه الدراسة مجموعة من القضايا، منها التهميش، وبناء الهوية، ومعنى الأمومة، ومن خلال تحليل هذه المحاور يمكن إدراك إسهام ديلاني في تشكيل ملامح المسرح النسوي، فضلاً عن تحديها للصور النمطية المرتبطة بنساء الطبقة العاملة. وتُعد المسرحية بذلك نصّاً غنياً يعكس بعمق تجارب هؤلاء النساء.