



Abigal Muchechetti

INVISIBLE WOUNDS

Silence, Survival, and
the Hidden Cost of Violence

Gender Studies

Collection Editors

JAN ETIENNE

REHAM ELMORALLY

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



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Abstract

Invisible Wounds: Silence, Survival, and the Hidden Cost of Violence argues that the most enduring forms of gendered violence are those rendered invisible – emotional, sexual, psychological, financial, cultural, spiritual, and institutional harms – that leave no bruise yet restructure a woman's entire life. Centring African and Black feminist thought, disability studies, and my experience supporting survivors within HR and safeguarding frameworks while working at a UK university, this book reframes invisibility as something produced through silence, respectability, bureaucratic design, and cultural expectations of endurance.

Drawing on feminist autoethnography, practitioner observation, and case-led analysis, the book exposes how institutions, from families and faith communities to universities and the state, translate violence into private trouble, procedure, or personal failing. It also traces how survivors navigate cultural scripts of duty, shame, and moral discipline, and how misrecognition intensifies for Black, migrant, disabled, and otherwise precarious women. Rather than focus solely on disclosure, the book argues for a structural politics of visibility, relational ethics, and survivor-centred repair. By blending theory, lived analysis, and practitioner tools, *Invisible Wounds* calls for redesigning the conditions under which safety, speech, and accountability become possible. It also introduces the **Reconstructive Freedom Framework (RFF)**, a Black feminist theory of post-violence reconstruction organised

around seven interconnected pillars that reframe recovery as a structural, relational, embodied, and political process rather than a return to a pre-violence self. It positions repair, not resilience, as the organising principle of meaningful institutional response.

Key words

Invisible wounds; emotional abuse; coercive control; African feminism; disability and violence; feminist autoethnography; domestic abuse; institutional betrayal; intersectionality; silence

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Content note

This book examines domestic and gender-based violence, including emotional, psychological, sexual, financial, spiritual, and institutional forms of harm. It explores how violence may be rendered invisible through silence, cultural expectation, bureaucratic process, and social misrecognition. Some chapters draw on feminist autoethnography, practitioner observation, and case-led analysis. While the book avoids graphic description, readers may encounter material that resonates with personal or professional experiences of harm, survival, or institutional betrayal.

Readers are encouraged to engage with the text at their own pace and to prioritise care in how and when they read.

Learning objectives

How are gendered forms of violence rendered invisible through silence, institutional design, cultural expectations, and respectability politics, and what are the costs of that invisibility for Black, African, migrant, and disabled women?

By engaging with this book, readers will be able to:

1. **Recognise** forms of violence that leave no visible mark, including emotional, psychological, sexual, financial, spiritual, and institutional abuse.
2. **Understand** how institutions, including families, faith communities, universities, welfare systems, healthcare, and the state, can normalise, minimise, or bureaucratised gender-based violence.
3. **Analyse** how cultural expectations of endurance, duty, respectability, and silence shape women's responses to violence, particularly within African and diasporic contexts.
4. **Examine** how race, migration, disability, class, and gender intersect to shape experiences of violence, recognition, credibility, and access to protection.
5. **Critically evaluate** disclosure-centred approaches to gender-based violence, recognising who is excluded, disbelieved, or placed at greater risk by models that assume disclosure is always possible or safe.
6. **Explore** what a structural politics of visibility requires beyond individual resilience, courage, or awareness.
7. **Apply** the principles of the Reconstructive Freedom Framework to consider how institutions might be redesigned around repair, dignity, accountability, and structural justice.

Introduction

Invisible wounds: Silence, survival, and the hidden cost of violence

Some wounds leave no mark yet reorder a woman's whole world. They live in pauses before answering a partner's question, in bank cards handed over "for harmony," in sex given to avoid punishment, in religious counsel that translates abuse into reconciliation, and in the bureaucratic language that converts pain into a line on a report. These are the wounds that persist because they are misrecognised as temperament, culture, misunderstanding, or private difficulty. To name them is not merely to describe harm; it is to expose the systems, expectations, and silences that allow harm to continue.

This book begins with the premise that invisibility is not evidence of absence. Invisibility is produced. It is produced through patriarchal norms that recast domination as care; through institutional practices that prioritise procedure over protection; through cultural scripts that frame endurance as virtue; through legal systems that privilege visible injury; through religious expectations that elevate forgiveness above safety; and through racialised and ableist assumptions that shape who is believed and who

is dismissed. Across Zimbabwe, the United Kingdom, and diasporic communities, these dynamics appear in different forms but share a common logic.

My standpoint in this work is shaped by multiple locations: As a disabled Black Zimbabwean-British woman; as an academic trained in leadership and institutional analysis; and as a Domestic Abuse Champion while working at a UK university, I have listened to, supported, and advocated for women navigating coercion across different social and institutional settings. I write not as a detached observer, nor as a memoirist seeking confession, but as a researcher-practitioner attentive to the everyday negotiations through which women survive emotional manipulation, financial captivity, sexual coercion, spiritual pressure, institutional dismissal, and the cumulative violence of being repeatedly unheard.

Invisible wounds take many forms. Some are emotional: a woman humiliated by a partner skilled in psychological warfare. Some are financial: wages withheld, accounts monitored, dependence reframed as care. Some are sexual: coercion disguised as marital obligation, apology used as access, refusal treated as betrayal. Some are cultural: shame politics that punish disclosure, respectability narratives that reward silence, diaspora expectations that transform endurance into moral duty. Others are institutional: complaint systems that drain survivors' energy while protecting organisational reputations, immigration laws that tether safety to spousal status, and disability systems unable to recognise abuse masked as care.

Across these varied forms of harm, one insight remained constant: A woman can leave an abuser and remain structurally

unsafe. Safety is not a moment. It is a condition shaped by institutions, economies, communities, bodies, and social recognition.

Why this book now

Gender-based violence has always been pervasive, but its least visible forms have become increasingly urgent. Emotional coercion, financial abuse, digital surveillance, institutional betrayal, and coercive control continue to expand within conditions shaped by austerity, migration precarity, racism, chronic illness, and declining social protections. Specialist Black and minoritised women's organisations in the UK have repeatedly demonstrated that institutional racism and immigration insecurity undermine access to safety, while disability scholars continue to show how dependence and care infrastructures can become mechanisms of control rather than protection.

At the same time, feminist scholarship has significantly expanded our ability to interpret these harms. Intersectionality reveals how women located at the crossings of race, gender, disability, migration status, and class frequently fall through institutional frameworks designed around singular categories of vulnerability. African feminist scholarship illuminates how cultural expectations around duty, silence, family continuity, and moral respectability shape women's negotiations with violence. Black feminist thought demonstrates how misogynoir, racialised stereotypes of strength, and epistemic erasure affect whose suffering is recognised as credible. Disability scholarship reframes dependence not as personal weakness, but as structural exposure within unequal systems.

This book brings these strands into sustained dialogue because survivors' lives do not unfold within neat theoretical categories.

The stories that shaped this work moved across homes, churches, universities, WhatsApp groups, immigration systems, GP surgeries, workplaces, and community spaces. Harm was never solely interpersonal or solely institutional. It was braided, cumulative, and socially organised.

What this book does

Invisible Wounds advances a reconceptualisation of gender-based violence that refuses narrow legal or physical definitions of harm. Emotional, financial, psychological, spiritual, and institutional violence are treated not as peripheral concerns but as central mechanisms through which domination is normalised and sustained. Violence is approached here not as a singular event but as a relational and structural condition embedded within everyday life.

Methodologically, the book combines feminist autoethnography, practitioner observation, institutional analysis, and case-led composite narrative. Personal experience is not used as confession or spectacle but as an epistemic resource through which broader structures of violence can be understood. Throughout the book, lived experience remains in dialogue with African feminist thought, Black feminist theory, disability studies, intersectionality, and decolonial analysis.

The book is also shaped by a practitioner lens attentive to safeguarding failures, bureaucratic violence, procedural exhaustion, and the limits of institutional response. It speaks not only to scholars but also to educators, community leaders, advocates, policy-makers, healthcare professionals, faith leaders, and practitioners

attempting to respond ethically to gender-based violence within unequal systems.

Towards the Reconstructive Freedom Framework

A central argument of this book is that dominant recovery frameworks remain insufficient for understanding life after gender-based violence. Many existing models prioritise crisis intervention, immediate safety, trauma stabilisation, or perpetrator management. While necessary, these approaches often fail to account for what survivors repeatedly describe after leaving: The long labour of rebuilding a life within conditions that remain unequal, precarious, and structurally unsafe.

For the women at the heart of this book, life after violence involves more than recovery. It involves reconstruction.

This insight forms the basis of the Reconstructive Freedom Framework (RFF), the book's central theoretical contribution. Developed across the later chapters of this manuscript, RFF conceptualises post-violence life not as a return to a previous self, but as a multidimensional process of rebuilding identity, safety, embodiment, belonging, narrative authority, and future possibility after structural and relational harm.

The framework unfolds through seven interconnected pillars

Structural stabilisation examines the immediate material conditions necessary for survival after violence. It focuses on securing housing, financial stability, healthcare, immigration security,

childcare, legal protection, and other structural resources that enable survivors to achieve safety before longer-term reconstruction can begin.

Identity reconstitution explores how women rebuild their sense of self after coercion, gaslighting, humiliation, and epistemic erosion. It considers how survivors reclaim dignity, agency, self-trust, and personhood after prolonged experiences of domination.

Relational recalibration focuses on the internal work of learning to trust again, recognising healthy boundaries, developing safer patterns of intimacy, and recalibrating emotional expectations following coercive relationships. Rather than rebuilding relationships themselves, this pillar concerns rebuilding the survivor's capacity to engage in relationships differently.

Narrative restoration examines how survivors reclaim voice after silencing. It centres the naming of harm, resisting institutional and cultural misrecognition, reconstructing personal narrative authority, and challenging the stories imposed by perpetrators and unequal institutions.

Structural navigation analyses the ongoing labour of negotiating institutions after leaving violence. Survivors frequently continue to encounter housing systems, immigration authorities, healthcare providers, welfare agencies, police, courts, employers, universities, and social care services that may simultaneously offer support while reproducing new forms of vulnerability. This pillar examines how women navigate these institutional landscapes.

Relational reconstitution examines the rebuilding of supportive social relationships after violence. It focuses on reconstructing trust within families, friendships, intimate partnerships,

professional networks, and other interpersonal relationships, recognising that survivors often need to rebuild or create entirely new support systems.

Community re-weaving explores how survivors reconnect with wider communities after violence, including diasporic networks, faith communities, neighbourhoods, advocacy organisations, support groups, and collective movements. It emphasises belonging, collective care, and rebuilding social worlds capable of sustaining long-term freedom beyond individual recovery.

How the book is organised

The book unfolds through a movement from naming invisible harm to theorising reconstruction after violence. Early chapters establish the conceptual foundations of invisible wounds, examining how emotional, financial, psychological, sexual, spiritual, and institutional violence become normalised, minimised, or rendered unspeakable within families, communities, workplaces, religious structures, and state systems. Silence is analysed not as absence, but as a social and institutional technology through which coercion is maintained and women are disciplined into endurance.

Subsequent chapters examine the mechanisms through which coercive control restructures identity, embodiment, autonomy, and social life across Zimbabwean, UK, and diasporic contexts. Particular attention is given to shame, stigma, respectability, disability, migration, chronic illness, racialisation, and the institutional management of harm. These chapters demonstrate how violence is mediated through broader structures of power rather than confined to individual relationships alone.

The later chapters shift towards reconstruction. Here, the focus moves from surviving violence to rebuilding life after coercive control: Rebuilding identity, relational trust, bodily autonomy, social belonging, and institutional navigation. These chapters culminate in the development of the Reconstructive Freedom Framework, which reframes post-violence recovery as a structural, relational, embodied, and political process rather than a purely psychological one.

The book concludes by arguing that meaningful responses to gender-based violence require more than awareness, disclosure, or resilience discourse. They require structural transformation, collective accountability, and new ways of theorising freedom, dignity, safety, and repair.

Methodological and ethical positioning

This book is grounded in feminist autoethnography, practitioner-based inquiry, and intersectional analysis. My standpoint is explicitly non-neutral. I write as someone who grew up in a home that functioned as a refuge for women in crisis; as a disabled Black Zimbabwean-British woman navigating the UK; and through my work supporting survivors within HR and safeguarding frameworks at a UK university, witnessing how institutions rapidly translate violence into documentation, risk protocols, and managed complaints.

The evidence presented is carefully held. I do not reproduce sensational detail, nor do I trade in voyeurism. Pseudonyms, composites, and anonymised vignettes are used throughout, and no

story is included unless it illuminates a broader pattern of harm or repair. The analysis draws on decades of observation, community work, spiritual contexts, disability experience, and institutional practice, rather than on isolated incidents or extractive testimony.

Throughout this manuscript, I use the term “women” to refer to the survivors whose lives and experiences inform the development of the Reconstructive Freedom Framework. This usage does not imply universality or homogeneity. The women whose stories shape this analysis are situated within intersecting structures of race, migration, disability, class, religion, geography, and cultural expectation. The theoretical claims advanced here emerge from these specific, relational contexts rather than from an abstract category of womanhood.

Ethics of care and witnessing

The work is guided by African feminist ethics of relation, particularly Ubuntu, alongside Black feminist epistemologies of survival and refusal, and disability justice principles. This ethical orientation prioritises dignity over spectacle, protects survivors’ interpretive authority, and treats silence not as failure, but as strategy. It also resists the individualisation of harm, refusing narratives that frame resilience as destiny or survival as moral obligation.

Methodological approach

Methodologically, the book adopts a hybrid form that reflects the nature of invisible wounds themselves: fragmented, cumulative, relational, and often undocumented. It combines autoethnography tracing my life across Zimbabwe and the UK, through

family, faith, education, and professional spaces, with institutional analysis of policies, safeguarding systems, HR procedures, and church governance. Narrative composites draw on recurring social, cultural, and institutional patterns rather than reproducing any single survivor's account, preserving safety while retaining analytical truth. Cultural analysis is woven throughout, interpreting diasporic social scripts that frame endurance as virtue and silence as dignity.

This hybridity is not stylistic indulgence; it is methodological necessity. Invisible wounds do not reside neatly within a single archive. They live in memory, in policy language, in pauses, in procedures, and in what institutions choose not to hear.

1

The world of invisible wounds

There are forms of violence that remain difficult for institutions, communities, and even families to recognise. Unlike physical assault, these harms often emerge gradually through emotional manipulation, coercive control, financial restriction, psychological degradation, spiritual pressure, and the slow narrowing of a woman's autonomy. They are embedded within everyday interactions: The partner whose moods reorganise the household, the financial arrangements framed as responsibility but experienced as surveillance, the silence maintained to prevent conflict, and the emotional obligations that transform intimacy into coercion. These forms of violence rarely produce immediate public visibility, yet they profoundly reshape women's lives.

Invisible violence is not the absence of violence; it is violence that frequently falls outside dominant frameworks of recognition. The World Health Organisation estimates that one in three women globally will experience physical or sexual violence during their lifetime, yet such statistics often fail to capture coercive control, emotional isolation, financial captivity, or spiritual manipulation. These forms of abuse may leave no visible injury, but they reorganise women's emotional worlds, bodily responses,

relationships, and sense of self over time. United Nations (UN) Women has described this widening crisis as a “shadow pandemic,” intensified by COVID-19, economic precarity, austerity measures, border restrictions, and declining social protections for women.

Yet invisibility is not universal. Invisibility is political. It is structured by factors such as race, gender, disability, class, immigration status, and cultural expectations. What counts as “harm” in a London courtroom may be unnameable in a Zimbabwean village; what counts as “abuse” in an HR office may be dismissed as “marital difficulty” in a church. What one community calls manipulation, another calls duty. What one law calls coercive control, another does not recognise at all.

As a British Zimbabwean woman who has lived across two cultural worlds, served as a Domestic Abuse Champion while working at a UK university, and continued this work beyond it, I have spent years listening to women struggle to put their experiences into words. The stories shift in geography but not in structure. A university administrator is quietly rationing her meals because her partner controls the bank account. A Zimbabwean woman shamed into silence because “kusimba,” bearing suffering without complaint, is celebrated as strength. A Polish migrant mother is afraid to leave because her visa is tied to her husband. A disabled British woman whose partner restricts medication “for her own good.” A South Asian woman whose priest insists forgiveness is holier than safety. A colleague who whispered to me, “He’s never hit me. That’s the problem. I don’t know if it counts.”

The harm is global, but the grammar of harm is local.

African feminist scholars have long argued that violence cannot be understood outside culture, kinship, and economic survival (Amadiume, 1997; Mama, 1997; Tamale, 2020). Black feminist scholars argue that violence is not simply an interpersonal act but a structure: A way the world disciplines women into silence (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Bailey and Trudy, 2018). Disability scholars remind us that dependence, when weaponised, becomes a terrain of control, not compassion (Thomas, 2007). Together, these bodies of knowledge make one message clear: Invisible wounds are produced. They do not emerge naturally. They require social conditions, institutional habits, cultural language, and gendered expectations.

When I began this work, I assumed that disclosures were rare because violence was rare. The more I listened, the clearer it became that silence, not rarity, was the explanation. Women taught me how expertly institutions can turn a disclosure into paperwork; how quickly a survivor's pain can be recorded, logged, and filed without a single structural change being made. I saw how mothers, sisters, and aunties lovingly reinforced the very norms that had hurt them: Urging women to "give it time," "lower your voice," "don't embarrass the family," or "he provides, doesn't he?" I watched how churches performed reconciliation without accountability. I sat in HR meetings where a woman crying in fear was reframed as having a 'communication issue', a mental health issue, or being menopausal. And I saw how women, intelligent, articulate, competent, began to doubt their own reality simply because no one around them could hold it.

This is what I mean by *invisible wounds*: Harms that are denied, minimised, spiritualised, culturalised, or bureaucratised until they

disappear from view. Their invisibility is not merely a matter of personal silence or individual denial. It is infrastructural. It is engineered into the systems that govern recognition, credibility, and response.

It is present in immigration regimes that tether women's safety to the endurance of a relationship, where leaving carries the threat of legal precarity or removal. It is sustained by economic structures that reward dependence and punish autonomy, rendering survival contingent on compliance. It persists in policing practices that are slow to recognise coercion unless it announces itself through visible injury or criminal rupture.

In healthcare, invisibility takes the form of misrecognition: Women of colour read as resilient, stoic, or "strong," and therefore presumed unhurt. In faith traditions, it appears as sanctified endurance, where suffering is moralised and patience is elevated above protection. In universities and other bureaucratic institutions, harm is translated into policy language, abstracted, managed, and filed until its human weight is lost.

Within disability services, control is often misnamed as care. "Carers" are recognised; controllers are not. Communities, meanwhile, may interpret silence as dignity, mistaking survival strategies for consent. Families, too, participate in this architecture of disappearance when the fear of shame outweighs the fear of danger, and reputation becomes more urgent than safety.

I learned early that what survives is not always what is safe. It is what is socially permissible.

Growing up in Zimbabwe, I saw women carry burdens disguised as virtue. I watched wives perform the rituals of respect to men

who had never earned it. I saw aunties whisper warnings into a niece's ear, yet publicly defend the very men they warned her against. I saw violence normalised as "marital correction," and a woman's tears interpreted as disobedience rather than distress. Yet I also saw how women strategised. How they found pockets of agency: Hiding savings, building networks, keeping secrets that saved their lives. Survival was not passive; it was intelligence.

Years later, working in UK higher education, I recognised the same patterns in different clothing. The accents had changed; the logic had not. Middle-class British women were too ashamed to admit emotional manipulation because "educated men don't do that." Migrant women feared reporting because "absence of status" made them disposable. Black women felt unable to name sexual coercion because stereotypes had denied them vulnerability. White rural women stayed because geography trapped them: No transport, no nearby refuge, no childcare.

Violence was not cultural. It was patterned. It simply adapted to each environment.

The truth is that every woman I spoke to was trying to survive within the constraints available to her. No one was choosing misery. They were choosing the safest option in unsafe systems. Across these stories – the Zimbabwean aunt, the British colleague, the migrant mother, the disabled survivor, a troubling pattern emerged: the world often seems more comfortable with a woman who suffers quietly than with one who disrupts the peace.

If global evidence shows anything, it is that institutions respond poorly when women disrupt that peace. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2021), survivors often face secondary

harm: Disbelief, minimisation, or bureaucratic delay. UN reports show that survivors frequently internalise blame because society demands proof of pain. Sociological studies show that women in coercive control situations often do not define their experience as “violence” until long after leaving.

This chapter places invisible violence at the centre of analysis, not the margins. It argues that if we are to understand gender-based harm globally, we must understand the cultural, institutional, and structural conditions that make violence visible or invisible. We must acknowledge that women across the world, navigate similar patterns shaped by different moral vocabularies.

This book examines those patterns and offers language for experiences that are often met with silence. It gives shape to accounts that institutions and communities have too often struggled to recognise. To give credibility to women whose realities have been doubted. And to give institutions fewer excuses for their failures.

Invisible wounds are real. They are global. And they demand global understanding.

How harm becomes invisible

Invisibility does not occur by accident. Violence becomes invisible through a combination of cultural scripting, institutional habits, emotional grooming, and the structural conditions that frame what women can safely say. When I began listening to survivors across Zimbabwe, the UK, and in the institutional corridors of higher education, I became aware that invisibility was not a

psychological flaw or personal failure. It was a system output. Something meticulously produced, rehearsed, and normalised.

Cultural narratives that disguise harm

Every culture carries a vocabulary for suffering. Some languages make pain unspeakable; others make endurance admirable. In Zimbabwe, I grew up with the word *kusimba*, the moral expectation that a woman must endure hardship with dignity. That word softened the rough edges of violence by turning silence into virtue. Women who endured quietly were praised as strong; women who spoke were castigated as difficult. African feminist scholars have long shown how these moral vocabularies protect patriarchy by turning cultural ideals into emotional prisons (Mama, 1997; Tamale, 2020).

Yet the UK is not immune. British respectability culture translates *kusimba* into its own idioms: “Don’t make a fuss,” “Keep the peace,” or “Don’t air private matters.” Middle-class professionalism rebrands endurance as maturity. Black British women told me they feared calling emotional abuse “abuse” because they had been raised to be “strong.” White women in rural England described a similar burden: A culture where small towns guard family privacy and the expectation of keeping up appearances encourages silence. South Asian women spoke of honour, reputation, and the fear of bringing shame upon the extended family.

Across these contexts, harm is invisible because women are taught that their suffering must be contained to preserve something larger than themselves: Family reputation, cultural identity,

religious duty, social cohesion. The moral pressure directs attention away from perpetrators and onto the emotional discipline of women.

Emotional grooming and psychological containment

In every conversation I have had with survivors, emotional manipulation was the most common thread. Not physical blows, but psychological training: How to apologise for things you didn't do, how to predict someone's moods, how to shrink conflict by shrinking yourself.

One woman described it starkly, "He never hit me. He didn't have to. I was trained." Her words are representative of a pattern that international research repeatedly confirms: psychological abuse can precede, accompany, or replace physical violence (Herman, 1992).

In England and Wales, coercive control is formally recognised in law under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, yet its everyday mechanics remain widely misunderstood in practice (Domestic Abuse Act 2021, s. 1). Women consistently described living in a permanent state of emotional calibration, in which speech, silence, consent, and refusal are continuously weighed against anticipated consequences. Decisions about when to speak, when to remain quiet, and when refusal might provoke retaliation are not abstract considerations, but organising principles of daily life.

These calculations shape the most ordinary aspects of existence: Eating, sleeping, working, parenting, and praying. Coercive control thus alters not only relationships, but the texture of everyday living, shifting the ground on which routine decisions