

Muslim men's conceptualizations of masculinity and sexual violence against women

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Overview

- Brief review of background literature
- Method
- Preliminary results
- Next steps in analysis



Background
Literature

Background Literature: Masculinity

- Masculinity has been implicated in violence against women and therefore is deserving of attention when trying to understand ways of addressing violence against women (Flood & Pease, 2009; McDermott, Naylor, McKelvey, & Kantra, 2017; Murnen, Wright, & Kaluzny, 2002)
- As gender is a social construct, masculinity can be conceptualized in a variety of manners (Cosgrove, 2000)
- However, cultures and societies categorize masculinities into a hierarchy in which some are given more value above others (Connell, 2005)

Background Literature: Masculinity and Violence Against Women

- In Western/colonial context, hegemonic masculinity is preferred (Connell, 2005)
 - Displays of strength, independence, invulnerability, emotional constraint, and rejection of the feminine
- An endorsement of this type of masculinity is associated with expressions of physical and sexual violence against women (Flood & Pease, 2009; Murnen, Wright, & Kaluzny, 2002; Reidy, Smith-Darden, Cortina, Kernsmith, & Kernsmith, 2015)

Background Literature: Muslim Masculinity

- However, conceptualizations of masculinity among Muslim men have not received enough attention
- Although hegemonic masculinity is relevant in a variety of contexts, it can still vary in its presentation (Casey, et al, 2016).
- Construction of masculinity among marginalized men is often informed by their marginalized status and all that it means (Connell, 2005) including for Muslim men (Hopkins, 2006)
- In Canada, Muslim men are marginalized and experience Islamophobia, racism, oppression (Afshar, Aitken, & Franks, 2005)
- Due to societal racism and oppression, marginalized men are excluded from access to power and thus from fully enacting hegemonic masculinity (Casey et al., 2016)

Background Literature: Marginalized Masculinity

- Marginalized men may construct their own masculinity either in opposition to hegemonic masculinity or by using various means to prove their own hegemonic masculinity (Barker, 2005)
 - Such as through their relationships with women
- Research suggests that men of colour may enact hegemonic masculinity through actions such as expressions of (hetero) sexual prowess (Kerrigan et al., 2007) or control of and violence against women (Dhillon & Ubhi, 2003)



Background Literature: Muslim Masculinity

- The limited research suggests that young Muslim men do construct masculinity in relation to Muslim girls and women, among other aspects of their lives (Archer, 2001; Hopkins, 2009)
- Requires its own line of inquiry to address sexual aggression and violence in the Muslim community



Purpose of this Study

- To explore how Muslim men construct their masculinities and the context those constructions of masculinity provide in understanding their attitudes toward the sexual harassment and coercion of, and violence against women in the Muslim community

Research Question

- How do young Muslim men construct and perform masculinity and what context does that provide for understanding their attitudes regarding sexual harassment and coercion of, and violence against, women?



Methods

Qualitative Methodology

- Intent was to do all focus groups
 - In the end we did:
 - One one-on-one interview (PEI)
 - Two focus groups with two participants each (PEI)
 - One online focus group with 4 participants (2 Americans, 2 Canadians)
 - One in-person focus group with 5 participants (Washington, DC; all Americans)
 - Total participants: 14 Muslim men
- Participants mostly newcomers – international students, new immigrants

Participants

- All identified as heterosexual
- Mean age: 31.93
- Marital status:
 - Married: 7
 - Single: 7
- Education:
 - Highest level: Masters (5)
 - Lowest level: Currently undergraduate student (6)
- On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely) how important is Islam to your daily life?
 - Mean: 4.37
 - No one reported lower than 3 (somewhat important)



Focus groups

- Facilitators:
 - Male undergraduate honours student, non-Muslim:
 - Interview and 2 two-person groups
 - Muslim man:
 - In person focus group
 - PI:
 - Online focus group

Focus Group Questions

1. Tell me about the idea of masculinity. When you think of masculinity what do you think?
2. What does it mean to be a Muslim man?
3. How do you think a relationship between a Muslim man and Muslim woman should be?
 - Within and/or outside marriage? (possible follow-up line of inquiry)
4. What do you think of the issue of sexual harassment of women?
5. What is the role of consent within a romantic or sexual relationship?
6. What do you think is the relationship between masculinity and sexual violence or abuse of women?
7. What do you think could be done to address things like sexual harassment, coercion, and violence?

Note: These are preliminary results
and a full, in depth analysis is yet
to be conducted

Preliminary Results and Discussion



Theme Categories

- Muslim masculinity
- Relationships between men and women
- Understanding sexual harassment, coercion, and violence
- Suggestions for addressing sexual harassment, coercion, and violence



Muslim Masculinity

Themes: Muslim Masculinity

- Muslim masculinity is defined by Islam
 - A Muslim man is one follows the Qur'an and the Prophet (pbuh)
 - He prays, fasts, etc.
 - John: "...someone who should pray let's say five times a day, is someone should believe in God and his holy Prophets...and is someone who shouldn't be seen doing evil deeds. What I mean evil deeds, I mean mostly harming others or being seen in places where you shouldn't be seen."
 - Drake: "To me being a Muslim man is not so different than being a normal man for many other religions. Um the dress the only difference would be in some other things we tend to avoid in Islam, such as drinking, premarital sex, and other things of the sort."
 - Fati: "Well that sounds, uh, something like, you can have as many definitions as, as, as there are Muslims I guess when it comes to that. Um, but um, Muslim, Muslim man, um, it means someone who, um, who submits, uh, essentially to, to God's will."

Themes: Muslim Masculinity

- Muslim masculinity is defined by social roles
 - Many men defined masculinity as maintaining one's responsibilities toward others – spouse, children, parents, siblings, or just others in general
 - Sam: “And maybe it contains the role of a, of men in the traditional family like the man is the ruler of the family and the man who is the one who brings food to home so he is the one in charge”
 - Omar: “I think, I think of somebody that's protects others and is willing to sacrifice themselves for that.”

Themes: Muslim Masculinity

- (Muslim) masculinity is complicated and fraught
 - The men spoke of masculinity, including Muslim masculinity, being complicated, diverse, and toxic
 - Fati: “Yeah, um, I mean to me it sounds like the very word itself is sort of a loaded term so, um, but I’ll, I’ll give it a shot.”
 - Wes: “So, I, I think uh, for me what’s uh, I don’t want to say confusing, but what’s tough about the term is figuring out uh as soon as you introduce Muslim or Islam to the equation.”
 - U: “I would say that my, my problems with masculinity are so, so, so big that I question my gender outright, right?”
 - JD: “um, yeah, so when I think of masculinity I’m thinking of just the sexist norms that men are, you know, in a position of domination, um, so for, you know, I’m struggling to find like a more positive definition of masculinity where it’s, where you actually have to challenge you know like sexist norms or, um, this idea that men are or maybe do, you know, things in order to prove their manhood. They have to be on top of everybody, like not just dominating other women but just being like you know quote-unquote better than other men. So that’s what I think of when I think of masculinity, I think I really think just think all negative stuff to be honest.”



Relationships between men and women



Themes: Relationships between men and women

- Relationships should be Islamically informed
 - Some of the men said that men and women should form relationships which are Islamically appropriate:
 - Never be alone with a member of the other gender
 - No sexual relationships outside of marriage
 - Friendship is fine, but always meet in public places

Themes: Relationships between men and women

- David: “but it [Qur’an] says you know uh getting like uh becoming like secret friends uh this like you know the secret relationships that happens like between the, ya the Quran like this, uh, doesn’t like the idea of like doing this, because it’s really uh, um, it’s a high chance that uh you might uh that uh, a man might commit uh or woman might commit uh what they call “Zina”, or is uh premarital sex”
- John: “the relationship between these two uh.. the first thing is the belief in God, and then the respect that you have between each other and those should be faithful”

Themes: Relationships between men and women

- Drake: “so there is the issue in Islam of, of like of a single guy and girl, who are single, like being alone and stuff, and do not to transgress those boundaries I mentioned before in religion, so that's a safeguard against that in Islam”

Themes: Relationships between men and women

- Relationships should be egalitarian
 - Many men expressed that romantic relationships between men and women should be egalitarian and respectful
 - Drake: “Well I guess it should just be um just like any other relationship so, like you can talk to them, you get to know them a bit, if you are in the same class or something, you can talk about school and stuff like that.”
 - Ali: “the relationship between Muslim men and women in my experience because I'm married, I can say that it's you first have to make build your relationship with God, and when each individual the man and the wife, or the, the case that are not married I don't know the guy and the girl, you know you'll see it also there ... but the first thing I'm talking about being married is you build that relationship with God, and then God puts love and mercy in your heart for each other so specifically it's built around number one the relationship with God individually, and then we believe that with our relationship God blesses us with love and mercy in our hearts for each other, so then so once we make that connection then we have this connection between each other, and that grows”



Themes: Relationships between men and women

- However, many men noted that relationships are not often egalitarian



Understanding sexual harassment, coercion, and violence

Themes: Understanding sexual harassment, coercion, and violence

- Muslim men who engage in these behaviours do not know Islam
 - Many Muslim men expressed that engaging in sexual harassment, coercion, and/or violence was completely unacceptable in Islam and the men who did such things were uneducated and ignorant about Islam
 - These men stated that Islam tells men to lower their gaze and not be alone with women who they are not related to

Themes: Understanding sexual harassment, coercion, and violence

- David: “it’s really depends on man to not look...that’s the part God says like, heaven is a reward for those who stop themselves from this stuff”
- Wes: “I think there’s so much that’s there in terms of things that are, hopefully if you’re following the, you know, the religion are preventative towards that. Right? Everything from, from lowering your gaze and kind of you know everything that comes with that”

Themes: Understanding sexual harassment, coercion, and violence

- Muslim women need to dress modestly to prevent sexual attention
 - Some Muslim men blamed, partially, women for their own harassment because of their clothing
 - David: “Like they say like cover their breasts um uh well cover their uh legs anything that actually can pose a like anything that makes men look and think and what they shouldn’t...you shouldn’t really look at that but if that happens um uh well it’s for your own, for the woman’s good”
 - John: “I cannot really put 100% uh guilt on someone that committed sexual harassment, even though it's not good at all, something that people should avoid, do the best to avoid. And that’s the reason in our religion like, woman should dress appropriately”

Themes: Understanding sexual harassment, coercion, and violence

- When Muslim men sexually harass or assault women, they do so because of unfulfilled sexual urges
 - A couple of men believed that the cause of sexual harassment and sexual assault was the sexual urges of men
 - Josh: “So as we become seniors we should teach our families and the men and women both in our um household that this is a no go zone, and teach them how to control their urges, if that is needed. Um this could be done religiously and Islam teaches men how to control sexual urges if they have any. So Islam does teach to avoid all this from happening from society yeah”
 - Drake: “Um like the whole reason sexual harassment exist is because the men's inability to control his urges I think, and that's another thing and Islam like, controlling your desires, controlling your urges, that's a big, um, topic in Islam I guess, there's loads recommendations for it. Um, like an order to become a good Muslim, overall, you have to be able to control your urges”

Themes: Understanding sexual harassment, coercion, and violence

- Sexual harassment, coercion, and violence are related to misogyny and patriarchy
 - Many of the men were able to make connections to systems of oppression and sexual harassment, coercion, and violence
 - Yusuf: “I’ll just say, the Me-Too movement has been really eye-opening right? Like for a lot of men like they must be looking around now and going “oh my God she too? She too? She too?” and you know like you look around and you see all, so it is, we’re completely oblivious to the extent of how patriarchy affects women and how much mental space it takes them to be able to cope and it’s just, like it’s, we really have a lot of waking up to do”
 - Jay: “Um, I definitely think that, ah, you know the notion of masculinity is interlocked with you know sexual violence against women. Um, and I think it’s just you know goes back to you know not to sound like a broken record but just talking about how, um, masculinity just puts you in this role of domination, you know, with all the me-too stories like with Harvey Weinstein and you know all these other people, like you hear a very consistent theme which is this, you know, this notion of entitlement right? That men can just, they can have whatever they want, um, you know just for being men”



Suggestions for addressing sexual
harassment, coercion, and violence

Themes: Suggestions for addressing sexual harassment, coercion, and violence

- Look to Islam/Qur'an for guidance
 - Many men believed that following the example of the Prophet and following Qur'anic guidance would help to address the issue
 - Specifically, many men referenced the Qur'an's guidance that men lower their gaze when they see women

Themes: Suggestions for addressing sexual harassment, coercion, and violence

- Re-imagining vulnerability and traditional femininity as part of Muslim masculinity
 - Some Muslim men suggested re-interpreting the Qur'an and presenting images of men, and the Prophet, which show vulnerability, caring, and more feminine characteristics of men

Themes: Suggestions for addressing sexual harassment, coercion, and violence

- Peter: “And then within expression, I would say, for, in order for a relationship to exist, in order for a meaningful relationship, or relationship to exist, if I’m walking around with my tough stoic exterior, I’m not letting you in. You can’t be my friend. Cuz I’m this tough guy. But if I sit down and I have a conversation like you and I have had where we express our vulnerability and the mistakes we made and how we messed up and then I’m able to empathize. Right? If I’m able to empathize with you and say ‘yeah man, I feel you, you know, that sucks you know, and’ whatever but not give you advice and not judge you that’s what facilitates relationships, and, and whether they’re between men and men or men and women.”

Themes: Suggestions for addressing sexual harassment, coercion, and violence

- Shad: “So, I think emotional maturity needs to be taught, um, both in like a outside the Islamic space but really within the Islamic space. It should be incredibly important, um, like thing that boys and girls should be learning but really, it's the boys that tend to lack there. And in our khutbahs right like our khutbahs should be talking more about this”



Next Steps



Apply insights to next steps

- Preliminary analysis has given me some insights
 - The men who were newcomers held more traditional views and emphasized religion in their understandings of masculinity as well as how to tackle sexual harassment, coercion, and violence
 - The men who were from Canada and the US offered less traditional, and more complex and critical understandings of masculinity, as well as offering more feminist understandings of how to tackle sexual harassment, coercion, and violence while at the same giving Islam a central role

In-depth Analysis

- Discourse analysis
 - Engage in a more in-depth analysis of the texts
 - Conservative discourses
 - Muslim masculinity is defined by following Islam
 - Innocent/ignorant man
 - Sexual aggression is based on sexual urges
 - Sexual aggression is done by men who are ignorant of Islamic teachings
 - Victim blaming
 - Gender segregation
- Progressives discourses
 - Masculinity is complex and fraught
 - Recognition of toxic masculinity
 - Struggling with tradition
 - Patriarchy and misogyny to blame for sexual harassment, coercion, and assault
 - Re-imagining vulnerability and femininity as part of Muslim masculinity as a means of addressing sexual aggression
- Discourses that overlap the two approaches
 - Follow the example of the Prophet



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Questions?