

# “MY WIFE IS THE BOSS”: MUSLIM MEN NEGOTIATING MASCULINITY IN AUSTRALIA

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## Introduction

This paper considers the issue of masculinity among Muslims in Australia. It focuses on Muslim men’s efforts to negotiate and maintain what is arguably the core component of their gendered religious identity: their status as the leader of the family. I intend to raise a question that has been overlooked in the discussion of gender in Islam and Muslim identity, considering it in the Australian context. As men’s identity and masculinity in Islamic cultures has for long become an unquestioned norm, Muslims need to make efforts to demystify such normativity.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of studies on Muslim masculinities particularly flows from possible tension that is exclusively encountered by Muslim men as a religious minority in Australia. Muslim men are traditionally expected to act as leaders of the family and are afforded an advantageous status that considerably constitutes their identity as men.<sup>2</sup> Power and authority are repeatedly pointed to as the mainstream values of male identity in the Islamic family. While women’s behaviour in marital relationships has been taken as a crucial issue that generates a number of important doctrines,<sup>3</sup> the exegetical texts on Islamic marriage entail a hierarchal marital relationship where a man is considered to be the “natural” leader of the family and is “entitled to the obedience and cooperation of his wife”.<sup>4</sup> Shaikh, Stalinsky and Yehoshua demonstrate that some of the leading exegetical authorities (such as Al Zamakshari and Al Razi in the Medieval or Yusuf Qaradawi and Maududi in the modern age) among Islamic orthodoxy regard men’s authority over women in the family to be God-granted for men.<sup>5</sup> Such powerful exegeses support men’s advantageous position in the family and eventually produce a narrative that associates men’s identity with rationality, intellect, determination and spirituality.<sup>6</sup>

However, such masculine privilege meets an enormous challenge from mainstream family practice in Australia where the idea of partnership is more acceptable. Family practices are exercised around values such as individual freedom, equality and secularity. Muslim men also encounter specific experiences of anti-Muslim sentiment. Hostility against Islam has particularly been addressed towards Muslim men. Western popular culture views Muslim men as modern demons because of the Western media depiction of terrorists.<sup>7</sup> Their universal image comprises bearded, gun-toting, bandanna-wearing men, in long robes or military fatigues used by some Islamists; their menace and aggression are symbolised in terrorists bearing associated names such as “Bin Laden” that represent a hypermasculine image of Islamism.<sup>8</sup> A large portion of public discourse concerning the incompatibility of Muslim identity with Australian values is primarily targeted at men.<sup>9</sup> Any criticism of Muslim women, particularly their veil and supposed seclusion from public for example, is a particular attack on their presumed totalitarian husbands.<sup>10</sup> This paper examines issues and challenges faced by Muslim men in their practice as husbands and how they negotiate their identity as the leader of the family in their position as a minority in Australia.

Literature on Muslim men and Muslim masculinities in Australia is arguably absent. There are two studies at this point addressing Muslim men in Australia. The first study by Nilan et al. examines Muslim masculinity among Indonesian students in Australia. Muslim masculinity in this study was associated with Javanese ideals for men.<sup>11</sup> An ideal type of man was described as demonstrating emotional refinement, full self-mastery, rationality, strong solidarity and collectiveness among his peers, sexual repression and spiritual potency.<sup>12</sup> However, this study cannot be taken as applicable to Australian Muslims since the participants were student visa holders and did not associate themselves with Australian identity. The second study, the Muslim Men Project undertaken in Sydney by Chafic, was a more comprehensive research project on Muslim men in Australia.<sup>13</sup> This study interviewed 70 first generation Muslim men in Australia, 74% of whom held Australian citizenship. These men came from more than thirteen countries of origin with more than seven ethnicities. The study provides invaluable information about Muslim men’s settlement experience in Australia and how they view the Australian public. However, Chafic did not address the gender question concerning Muslim male experiences and identity.<sup>14</sup> Therefore the question that needs to be addressed is to what extent their settlement experience would affect their practice of manhood, their position in family relationships and their negotiation of patriarchal power which they inherited through religious

channels. While patriarchy benefits most men, little attention has been paid to the manner in which men as a minority group access and negotiate patriarchal power.<sup>15</sup>

## **Research and Participants**

This paper is part of a larger project studying Muslim masculinities conducted in Melbourne.<sup>16</sup> The data was generated using individual interviews and group discussions involving twenty Muslim men living around Melbourne. I adopted Saeed and Akbarzadeh's definition of Muslims to include all men who associate themselves with at least some cultural forms associated with Islam, regardless of their practice; or see Islam as contributing to their identity and culture; or those who accept the basic teaching of Islam regardless of interpretation.<sup>17</sup> The male participants were aged from 24 to 65, with two being single and the others married. Twelve men were born in Indonesia and had been living for 12 to 35 years in Australia during the study. Five men had Malay background, came from Singapore and had been living for 11 to 20 years in Australia during the interviews. Three of the participants were second-generation Muslims with at least one parent born in Indonesia. They were all practising Muslims. I chose their South-East Asian background as these groups have been largely overlooked in the literature on Islam in Australia. They heard about the study and how to become involved in it from personal and organisational links and research flyers I distributed among Muslim organisations.

Most of the interviews were conducted in mosques and community halls during religious gatherings. One interview was done in a café, one in a parking area and another one was conducted while one of the participants was driving. They were mostly in English. An explanatory statement was given and written consent was obtained from all participants. Three occasions of group discussion were conducted in one of the mosques involving three to five men, all in Indonesian. When I quote participants' statements directly on the text I use pseudonyms for all names. The "[ ]" mark is used to add words or information skipped by participants during the talks; the "( )" mark identifies information about what a participant was referring to in his statement; and "{...}" is used to omit statements irrelevant to the issue being discussed.

## Muslim Masculinities

Masculinity has been defined in various ways and is used to refer to different phenomena: these include norms, values, standards, attitudes, identities, performance and practices that define men as a distinct social category.<sup>18</sup> Masculinity is historical, created by a form of society (with changing forms of patriarchy), and was maintained by certain relations of power in it.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, masculinities may also reflect a particular social position and its embodiment as a strategy of resistance.<sup>20</sup> Muslim masculinities are not a homogenous phenomenon, but are varied and often demonstrate contradictory constructs, as Muslims’ identities themselves are not coherently bound. Authors on Muslim masculinities have reiterated that gendered identities among Muslim men are contextual, provisional and involve complex negotiations in everyday life.<sup>21</sup> In this negotiation, religious resources, particularly the texts, are only one albeit crucial aspect of many others which contribute to Muslim masculinities.

A major part of Muslim male identity is defined through contrast, relation and hierarchy over women and femininity. This relation could be considered to be a key narrative of Muslim masculinities. The idea of gender difference is crucial in this narrative.<sup>22</sup> But even more crucial to this narrative is how that difference entails relations of power. Studies of Muslim men in Muslim majority societies like Morocco, Sudan, Pakistan and Yemen underline the importance of gender privilege over women as an underlying notion of masculinity. A relationship through which such privilege is exercised is, however, specific to men’s identity and is marked by their role and authority to guide, protect, educate and control women’s conduct.<sup>23</sup>

Men’s relationship with women, one that crucially shapes masculinity, is specially institutionalised in marriage and families. A doctrine shared by some widely followed schools in Islamic orthodoxy (such as Syafi’is, Hanbalis and Malikis) states that a man is the head or leader of the family. The debate regarding this doctrine has been centred on the interpretation of an Arabic word ‘*qawwāmūn*’ occurring in verse 34 of the chapter *An-Nisa* of the Qur’an. This word has been interpreted differently in Islamic exegesis: “the protector” (Ali), “the maintainer” (Ali), “the breadwinner” (Hibri, Hasan) or “the caretaker” (Asad), all which are intended to imply what the Qur’an says about men’s position in relation to women in the family.<sup>24</sup> However, the more widespread understanding of the word among Muslims is “the leader” or the one “in charge”.<sup>25</sup> For some Muslim scholars, the verse also implies the reason as to why a man should be the leader: that is, because God has made “some to excel others”.<sup>26</sup> Some

prominent Muslim scholars interpreted this concept of “to excel others” by explaining a numbers of qualities associated with male privilege such as intellect, power, spirituality and physicality.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, while strongly influential such interpretation is not without critique and does not reflect the actual practice of Muslim families. Some Muslim scholars contend that patriarchy has inevitably directed the mainstream interpretation of Islamic doctrines dealing with women and family.<sup>28</sup> Several Muslim scholars argue that the status of leader is not determined by male gender but a person’s qualities, and this is what the Qur’an actually refers to in the verse discussed above. Therefore this status is a negotiable and exchangeable role between men and women, not an absolute status belonging to men alone.<sup>29</sup>

In mainstream Islamic orthodoxy, power and authority are pointed out as the core values of male identity. Men are religiously obligated to lead, supervise and educate women, as they possess the capability to do so. It is the exercise of men’s relationship with women in marriage that most fully determines their masculine potential. This can be compared to what Connell calls the “gender project” at the individual level.<sup>30</sup> Here, family serves the space where masculine power is “exercised through self-regulation and self-discipline – a process of ‘identity work’”.<sup>31</sup> By acting in ways that comply with dominant gender norms in the context of family life, men reproduce masculine domination within the more encompassing boundary of society. Because this gender norm is supported by patriarchal interpretation of religious texts many Muslim men believe that it is part of religious practice.<sup>32</sup>

### **Men as “Partners” to Women**

In Australia Muslim men encounter different mainstream practices of relations with women in the family. These practices are exercised around very different values including individual freedom, equality between persons and secularism. Mainstream Australian practices embrace more practical instead of religious reasons for marriage. The notion of partnership and equality are predominant expectations for many couples. Many couples do not feel it necessary to engage in the institution of marriage in order to establish a relationship traditionally defined as the family. Further, while wedding ceremonies are often held in churches as a Christian ritual, and many undertake marriage for religious reasons, marriage in Australia is a non-religious institution.

This practice of being coupled does not demand a type of hierarchical relationship between men and women. It therefore does not necessarily

require a man to occupy a culturally superior position, while a man's domination in marriage may take different forms. A man's marital status does not seem to be crucial to the common features of Australia manhood, while other elements of domination over women remain.<sup>33</sup> Men's status as a “partner” is much more familiar and comfortable for many compared with being a “husband”. To apply a man's status as the head of the family in Australia therefore hardly accords with the mainstream discourse of partnership where a man is expected to act as a partner rather than as a leader. The Muslim men in this study felt that these differences pushed them out of their comfort zone and that they were experiencing a kind of culture shock, as Amin (53) recalled:

Indonesian family who arrived here in the first time would get a culture shock. Right. They have to adjust hard. Men for example, in Indonesia they were used to be served by women. Right. But they cannot get that here. Everybody is the same here.

Holding the belief that men possess greater qualities in terms of rationality, spirituality and personality than women due to their gender would mean holding values which are in opposition to the individual equality underlying the idea of partnership in Australia. Also, to assume that one party (here, women) possess lesser qualities as human beings in terms of their inherent intellect and ability to make decisions would mean revitalising old forms of sexism. Accepting the practice of partnership in this way and therefore restricting themselves to the position of partners rather than leaders would mean Muslim men would lose the determining element of their gender identity within a framework they believed to be religious. Yet, preserving the role of a leader in the family as a normative status is at odds with the Australian context. How did Muslim men respond to this situation? There were two main strategies Muslim men in this study employed in their negotiation of this issue: resisting and adapting the practices of partnership.

### **Resisting Australian Partnership**

Resisting the Australian view of marital relationship as partnership was the strategy shared by most male Muslim participants. In doing so, they managed to maintain their position as the head of the household. Some participants used the term “imam” of the family to refer to this position which implies leadership within a religious institution. By this strategy Muslim men wanted to defend and feel secure in their religiously-justified

dominant identity from the threat posed by Western views of partnership. Below are some of their statements:

Since the beginning, since I got married I am the imam. Right. As I said before that the husband is the leader in the family. Leader in a broad meaning. (Subagya, 60)

Men as the imam, women as the followers. (Afdhal, 28)

Man is the leader. So he has to show that he can lead. (Jundy, 43)

The man is the imam, means the protector of the family. (Usep, 65)

For some men, resisting Australian views of relationships as a partnership was part of their rejection of secularism and associated Western values such as individual freedom and equality. In this stance they were employing religious considerations. These Muslim men would consider freedom in its Western meaning as inherently secular. Singaporean born Umsa (54), an engineer working in the Melbourne CBD, gave a clear rejection of both values as he tried to defend the concept of men as natural leaders of the family against Western views of relationships. He said:

Men have to be the leader and the Western [people] don't accept that. They say, "You are a man and she is a woman, we both have brain, sometime some women are better than men. We are Western and we have freedom. We can do anything." But the Qur'an says that [a man is the leader over woman]. . . . I think there should be a reason why in Islam the man has to be the boss. . . . The reason is that men are more capable and stronger, while women are little weak. . . . I have experienced it myself, regarding the difference between a man and a woman when they act as a boss. (Umsa, 54)

In his statement above Umsa (54) referred to what he perceived as Australian values by saying "both have brain", "freedom" and "can do anything", values he associated with being "Western". Umsa (54) rejected these views for religious reasons, "because the Qur'an says that . . ." Often this attitude comes out as resistance to the Western secularist ideology especially when dealing with gender. They understand equality in a different way. Fahroni (44) gave a strong opinion about this. He said:

In Australia, justice means equal. But in my opinion equality is not always the rightful. Justice should be meaning that you put things in the right place. This is justice. Not everyone is equal. {...} Men and women are always different. Justice in Islam means we put things in the right place. Men should be [considered to get] more, [because] they have more

responsibility than women. {...} I’m talking about Islamic view. This idea of justice is part of the very dangerous movement of women’s emancipation. (Fahroni, 44)

Fahroni (44) represented a typical response of many Muslims’ responses to the question of equality between men and women. He suggested a religious reason as to why a man has to gain more and deserve more, namely the responsibility associated with his position as the head of the family.

The emphasis on religious narrative often went together with the reinforcement of men’s superior identity. Referring back to Umsa’s (54) quotation above, he was talking about men’s leadership in a general way, in his case as an employee of a modern company. Afdhal (28), a second generation Muslim, talked about men in the specific matter of family. Responding to my question about men in the family he gave a straightforward statement, linking Islamic perspectives and men’s superior position over women. He said:

The family institution in Islam is very important as the foundation of the society. Man as Imam and woman as the follower. In fact if we are the imam, we are actually the ones who are carrying the woman. We protect them, we guard them, because they are the mothers of the future. (Afdhal, 28)

In terms of Islamic knowledge, Afdhal (28) was significantly the most knowledgeable participant who gave speeches on religious occasions. In his statement he switched directly from stating Islamic perspectives on family to state clearly men’s and women’s place in it and detailed men’s superior roles over women. According to him, the leader or, in his word, the “imam” of the family is the one who carries, guards and protects women. To Afdhal’s list other participants added roles such as “guide2 (Fahroni, 44), “educator” (Jundy, 43), “leader” (Subagya, 60, and Jundy, 43), “exemplar” (Usep, 65, and Roy, 35) and “breadwinner” (Roy, 35 and Afdhal, 28). All of these practices contribute to a Muslim male identity. These are what a Muslim man does, and what make him different from and superior to a Muslim woman. The frequent association between Islam and men’s superiority implies that the discourse of men’s superiority requires religious backing in order to survive in Australia, something that Muslim men are familiar and comfortable with.

During interviews, some other men described their attitudes toward their wives using expressions that indicated certain practices of superiority performed from their position as “imam” of the family. These are some of them:



I taught her how to be independent. (Usep, 65)

That because the way I teach them. (Zakky, 49)

I gave a strong emphasis to her that [...], (Amin, 54)

I always teach her [about religious matter] [...]. (Roy, 35)

I do a religious learning activity for family, where I teach them about religion. (Jundy, 43)

These men claimed their status as the leader in order to attempt to give impact upon their wife (and children in some cases). The strong tones used by these participants and the way they referred to women's position as an issue being talked about in the interviews reflect an imagined authority that allows men to produce those impacts. Zakky (49), for example, in his statement above was talking about his successful strategy in managing family life according to his Islam-associated framework to overcome the perceived side-effect of too much freedom and equality being applied in Australian families. Amin (53) was talking about what he did as a Muslim husband in overseeing his wife's attitude. Roy (35) was claiming how he as a husband possessed more knowledge about Islam compared to his wife and how he used this advantage to supervise his wife with regard to attitude.

However, these claims are far from indicating the existence of a relationship of domination as a result of this insistence upon the status of the head in the family. During the interviews and the group discussion I did not find any indication of such domination by Muslim men in this study. The opposite was true, as the demand for equality and individual freedom was very strong. The Indonesian and Malay Muslim wives of these men enjoyed a lot more freedom and gained a strong position in the family, something that many Muslim men had to adjust and struggle with. For some men, this fact is exactly what makes restating their position as leader in the family very important. The status as leader of the family often enabled the male participants to feel secure with their masculinity. That is, their superior religious self was not being completely degraded by the mainstream views on equality in Australia.

### **Adapting the Practice of Partnership**

For some Muslim men, however, the claim of being the leader of the family does not prevent them from adapting to more Western practices of partnership in their relationships with their wives. Men like Suyanto (43)

and Usep (65) adopted common practices of being a partner while maintaining the status of being the head of the household. For both men, it was more realistic in Australia to act as a partner and share many responsibilities with their wives, not acting or making decisions on their own, sharing their thoughts, and seeking approval from their wives was one of the types of partnership practices the men performed.

Suyanto (43) was born in Sumatra but grew up in Melbourne. After years of engagement with different Australian white girlfriends during his youth he ended up marrying a Javanese-born Muslim woman and has two sons from that union. During interview, Suyanto (43) lightly commented on his particular situation with his wife in terms the actual power relation in their marital relationship in day-to-day experience. He admitted that his wife often has a greater influence than he does in the way they organise the family. He said:

Concerning our relationship, I would say that my wife is the boss. Because sometime I can't do anything without her agreement you know. But that doesn't mean I'm weak with her. (Suyanto, 43)

The nature of Suyanto's expression did not suggest that he was objecting about his wife's position; rather he was fully aware of it and took it as part of his marital life in Australia. He quickly added the claim that he was not being “weak with her” in order to assert that he had not completely lost the associated values as a man in the family. He went further by explaining his consideration to always share thoughts and decisions with his wife and son. He continued:

I'd like to be agreed for decisions I make for all of us [in the house]. So, if we try to make a decision, that has to be agreed with my wife. Basically that's it. I can't be selfish. Even though I'm the leader of the family and I can make a decision without asking my wife. [But] Maybe [because] I grew up here, so, I should to take Australian way to adopt being a Muslim in here. It is better to think with two heads instead of only one. I ask their (his wife and sons) opinions and manage to not being selfish. (Suyanto, 43)

Suyanto (43) struggled hard in his position as a husband in the early period of his marital life. He learned that not being selfish is the keyword in his position as the leader of family and he called his practice being a “Muslim husband in an Australian way”. Suyanto's (43) experience and strategy was closely related to his wife's demand for an equal position and shared responsibility at home.

Usep (65) was one of the more senior members of the Muslim community I interviewed for this study. He shared a detailed story about what he learned from the Australian experience of being husband (or “partner” as he said a few times) for over 30 years of his marital life. He repeatedly stressed that for a Muslim man the situation in Australia is completely different to that in Indonesia. Usep (65) emphasised that the Australian situation urged men to act in ways that are more practical for the needs of the family. A man cannot act like a boss as he possibly used to in Indonesia. For Usep (65) sacrifice is the keyword for a man acting as the head of family. He strongly stressed this principle. He said:

First because the situation here is different to that in Indonesia. When you love your wife, your partner, your children, you have to sacrifice. To be the head of the family is not easy. You have to sacrifice; sacrifice feeling, time, energy. . . . So if you really love your wife or partner, we have to share with her for anything. It’s not like “this is her job, this is my job”. It is not like that. (Usep, 65)

In Usep’s case, sacrifice in a man’s position as the family leader means letting go of some of his customary privilege and authority. It is done by sharing burdens and responsibilities with one’s wife and loosening the strict division of labour between husband and wife. Usep (65) was the only participant that used the term “partner” when he talked about his relationship with his wife in the interview. He stressed the centrality of love in his position instead of superiority or authority that enabled him to perform this strategy.

During the interview, Usep (65) spent a significant time recalling a practice that, due to their deeply ingrained dominant culture, many Muslim men in Indonesia would not do: participating in the delivery of a baby. He proudly gave details that as a man he learned about and was involved in antenatal preparation and the delivery, providing support to his partner during labour and handling the newborn. He acknowledged that those practices were due to maternity services in Australia that requires the man to be involved in the maternity roles:

Here when the wife is expected to have a baby, we (the men) have to go to the hospital [to attend sessions] to learn how to wash the baby, learn about what to do when the mother is having the baby, delivering the baby in the labour room. So we have to learn all of these, [also] learn how to calm her down. They (the man) have to do that because as partners they have to know. {...} I am very proud of myself when the doctor asked me to cut the [umbilical] cord. I am very proud. (Usep, 65)

When I asked him as to whether he considered these practices to be in accordance with Islamic teaching, he quickly and firmly replied, “This is Islam, that’s realistic!” With the experiences he underwent for all of his three children, Usep (65) believed that men should be involved in the reproductive duties especially in the delivery. Moreover, he further shared his practice with maternity service providers in Indonesia:

Then I shared my experience to one doctor I knew in Indonesia, he said “oh yeah, I might to do the same thing” and he did. Because it’s like taboo in Indonesia (to have the man being involved in the child birth in the labour room) and I shared my experience here to my relatives, the patients and the doctors, and they opened their mind, and they practised it. There was no such thing (a procedure involving the partner in the labour) before [in their place], maybe it was prohibited. Because they never do it (in Indonesian maternity services), but here the system works like that (involving the male partner in the maternity activities). (Usep, 65)

That was Usep’s experience about 30 years ago. The fact that he could recall the story in detail with enthusiasm shows the importance of that experience for him as a man. Usep (65) believed that taking part in reproductive roles, an area that is seen as strictly a women’s area in the culture of many Muslim communities in Indonesia, is a “very important” part of men’s practice in the family. He especially gave strong reminder to his own sons about what a husband’s responsibility is in that practice:

I told to my sons that one day when you have a wife and she delivers a baby, you have to go there [in the labour room with her]. (Usep, 65)

Usep (65) wanted his conduct as a husband to become a good example of Muslim men’s practice for his own sons. In this stance, he employed his position as the leader, whose role, according to Usep (65), should include being a good example to other family members. Usep (65) took this role of being the example for his family seriously, to the point where he expanded some practices of being a man to include areas which in his cultural background are believed to be feminine. Usep (65) expressed a strong opinion that this change is a valid practice involved in being a man.

There is nothing wrong with a man do ironing when the woman cooking, its nothing wrong with a husband cooking when the wife working, because the children at home [and somebody needs to take care of them]. As leader we have to give examples to the children and also to the wife. When we feel we have each other, when we call understanding each other, then the family itself will be ok. (Usep, 65)

While maintaining the notion of head of the family with all supposed superior attributes attached to it (becoming an example for the family), Usep (65) gave the religious associated idea of leadership a different role and responsibility, taking house duties that accord with practices culturally associated with women at home that he was endorsing. With that he did not actually change the core component of Muslim masculinity as the leader of family, but he exercised it through new practices that accord with the demands of living in Australia. What is important in this negotiation is Usep's claim that his practice in the Australian context is based on his faith.

Usep's (43) case and Suyanto's (65) case mentioned earlier illustrate how Muslim men have adapted practices of partnership while still employing religious frameworks to claim their leadership position in the family. Their strategies suggest that the practice of being the head of the family in Australia can vary among Muslim men, but the discourse of men possessing certain superior identity-traits that allow them to bear bigger responsibility in carrying the family seemed to remain the same.

## Conclusion

The discussion above reveals at least three layers of considerations. First, the male participants' attitude in consistently holding the narrative of men's leadership in the family reflects the deep influence of what Barlas calls the patriarchal reading of the holy text.<sup>34</sup> This perspective of reading, or what I shall call "maleness reading", is characterised by the tendency to reproduce gender ideology centred on men's superiority. This reading often operates by stressing men's superiority in biology (go to war, act as protector, riding skill) which is then extended to the level of ontology (to determine men's relationship with women but also with God) and morality (guiding, educating, being the moral example for women). As a number of scholars have stressed, gender inequality distributed in Muslim religious consciousness is not generated from the teaching of the Qur'an, but from the secondary religious texts such as the exegesis (*tafsir*) and the study of *hadith* and their commentaries. From these secondary texts, the masculine tendencies reach Muslim audiences through religious textbooks, sermons, speeches, excerpts, religious stories or living practices of religious figures, from which, I believe, the Muslim men of this study learn about Islam. The masculine tendencies are well accepted as they resonate with the already well-established gender order endorsed by the non-religious references of the culture. Not all men in this study explicitly mentioned (for one or another reason during the interview) the importance of this

status as leader of the family. However, many of those who did address it arguably subscribe to this masculinised doctrine of Islamic marriage. Muslim men with Malay and Indonesian backgrounds shared an interest in the religious doctrine of men’s superior position. This attitude was also expressed by Afdhal (28) who was born in Australia and had been studying Islam from different Muslim countries. These men believed that the doctrine of male leadership of the family is an important part of religious teaching. The literature of how this doctrine contributes to Muslim men’s identity is unsurprisingly limited considering the focus has been on women. Muslim scholars in fact discuss this matter in order to address the position of women, not that of men. This situation reflects what Gerami observes as the normative and unquestioned position of men in Islamic discourse.<sup>35</sup> The degree to which this doctrine of men as leaders contributes to Muslim masculinity is a crucial issue to be analysed further in order to understand the gender ideology in Muslim communities and its involvement with religious discourse. The fact that many of the participants used the word “imam” (a word that the Qur’an does not use in addressing familial relationships) of the family reflect the degree to which the men wanted to maintain the superior gendered status as Muslims.

Second, the normative status as leader of family remains fundamental for Muslim masculinity. Muslim men in this study could not afford to lose this privilege as the core element of their identity. The men’s attitude reflects resistance to Australian discourses about gender and men’s position in relation with women in the family. The Muslim men proposed religious reasons for rejecting the views that they see as main part of Western secularism in Australia and managed to preserve the narrative of men’s superiority using a religious framework. The mainstream Islamic discourse provided a powerful tool for the men in maintaining this claim. In some cases, the claim over leadership position in the family served as a way of making men feel secure with their religiously associated manhood.

Last, this study shows that years of experience living as a religious minority group within an increasingly secular public where different practices of gender relation is widespread has affected the men’s practice of masculinity and ways of becoming a man. In such experience, being married and having a family does not always lead to the luxury of manhood. While holding the belief of their status as leaders of the family, the men are forced, in one of the other way, to recall, redefine the meaning and negotiate practices of leadership in order to cope with the enormous demand for individual freedom and autonomy in the family. Some men indicated more resistant responses by employing religious discourse in coping with the challenge of changing patterns in marital relationships as a

result of this experience. Other men, such as Usep (65) and Suyanto (43) went through a more adaptive approach to what they saw as Australian practice. The later cases illustrate that living as a minority has led them to search and employ different practices of being a husband and stress different roles and models without losing the space to claim their privileged role as family leader as part of their religious belief. I should also mention that their claim of leadership in the household does not reflect the actual practice of gender relations in the family, and therefore gives crucial insight into what the men believe constitutes a religious man.

### Acknowledgement

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Shahin Gerami, "Islamist Masculinity and Muslim Masculinities," in *Handbook of Studies on Men & Masculinities*, ed. M. S. Kimmel, J. Hearn and R. W. Connell (Thousand Oaks, London & New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2005), 456; Lahoucine Ouzgane, "Islamic Masculinities: An Introduction," in *Islamic Masculinities*, ed. Lahoucine Ouzgane (London, New York: Zed Books, 2006), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam, Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 83–84; Mohammed Baobaid, "Masculinity and Gender Violence in Yemen," in *Islamic Masculinities*, ed. L. Ouzgane (London New York: Zed Books, 2006), 164.

<sup>3</sup> A very common example of such behaviour is *nushuz*. See for example Mulki Al Sharmani, "Qiwama in Egyptian Family Laws: 'Wife Obedience' between Legal Texts, Courtroom Practices and Realities of Marriage," in *Muslim Family Law, Justice and Ethics in the Islamic Legal Tradition*, ed. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Kari Vogt, Lena Larsen and Christine Moe (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 45; Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Exegetical Violence: *Nushuz* in Qur'anic Gender Ideology," *Journal for Islamic Studies* 17 (1997): 63.

<sup>4</sup> Yusuf Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam* (Kuwait: International Islamic Federation of Student Organization, 1984), 205.

<sup>5</sup> Shaikh, "Exegetical Violence," 58–59; Steven Stalinsky and Y. Yehoshua, *Muslim Clerics on the Religious Rulings Regarding Wife-Beating* (Washington DC: Middle East Media Research Institute, 2004), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Shaikh, "Exegetical Violence," 59.

<sup>7</sup> Greg Noble, "The Face of Evil, Demonising the Arab Other in Contemporary Australia," *Cultural Studies Review* 14, no. 2 (2008), 19–13.

<sup>8</sup> Noble, "The Face of Evil," 20; Scott Poynting, Greg Noble, Paul Tabar and Jock Collins, *Bin Laden in the Suburbs, Criminalising the Arab Other* (Sydney: Sydney Institute of Criminology Series, 2004), 158.

<sup>9</sup> Wafa F. Chafic, *Collaborative Responsibility: A Capacity Building Approach Based on Research with Recently Arrived Muslim Men* (Sydney: Auburn Migrant Resource Centre, 2008), 16; Nilan, Pam, Mike Donaldson, and Richard Howson, "Indonesian Muslim Masculinities in Australia," *Asian Social Science* 3, no. 9 (2007), 19.

<sup>10</sup> Waleed Aly and Susan Carland, "The Anatomy of anti-Muslim Sentiment in Australia: The Case of Muslim Women," in *Terrorism and Social Exclusion: Misplaced Risk-Common Security*, ed. D. Wright-Neville and A. Halafoff (Cheltenham UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2010), 43.

<sup>11</sup> Nilan et al, "Indonesian Muslim," 22.

<sup>12</sup> Nilan et al, "Indonesian Muslim," 22–25.

<sup>13</sup> Chafic, *Collaborative Responsibility*.

<sup>14</sup> Chafic, *Collaborative Responsibility*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell and John Lee, "Toward a new Sociology of Masculinity," *Theory and Society* 14, no. 5 (1985), 593.

<sup>16</sup> I would like to acknowledge the support of the Endeavour Awards program that allowed me to conduct the project.

<sup>17</sup> Abdullah Saeed and Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Searching for Identity: Muslims in Australia," in *Muslim Communities in Australia*, ed. A. Saeed and S. Akbarzadeh (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2001), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Jeff Hearn, "Theorizing Men and Men's Theorizing: Varieties of Discursive Practices in Men's Theorizing of Men," *Theory and Society* 27, no. 6 (1998), 786–787; Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities* 2nd edn. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press., 2005), 70–71.

<sup>19</sup> Oystein Gullvag Holter, "Social Theories for Researching Men and Masculinities: Direct Gender Hierarchy and Structural Inequality," in *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*, ed. M. S. Kimmel, J. Hearn and R. W. Connell (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005), 20.

<sup>20</sup> Jeff Hearn and David L. Collinson, "Theorizing Unities and Differences Between Men and Between Masculinities," in *Theorizing Masculinities*, ed. H. Broad and M. Kaufman (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994), 110.

<sup>21</sup> Shahin Gerami, "Mullahs, Martyrs, and Men: Conceptualizing Masculinity in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Men and Masculinities* 5, no. 3 (2003): 264; Karin Willemse, "On Globalization, Gender and the Nation-State: Muslim Masculinity and the Urban Middle-Class Family in Islamist Sudan," in *The Gender Question in Globalization: Changing Perspectives and Practices*, ed. T. Davids and F. v. Driel Hants (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2005), 170–171; Louise Archer, "'Muslim Brothers, Black Lads, Traditional Asians': British Muslim Young Men's Constructions of Race, Religion and Masculinity," *Feminism & Psychology* 11, no. 1 (2001); Hasmita Ramji, "Dynamics of Religion and Gender amongst Young British Muslims," *Sociology* 41, no. 6 (2007), 1177; Louise Archer, *Race, Masculinity and Schooling: Muslim boys and education* (Maidenhead: Open



University Press, 2003), 50–51; Peter E Hopkins, “Youthful Muslim Masculinities: Gender and Generational Relations,” *Transaction of the Institute of the British Geography* 31 (2006), 348–349.

<sup>22</sup> Lena Gerholm, “Overcoming temptation: on masculinity and sexuality among Muslims in Stockholm,” *Global Networks* 3, no. 3 (2003), 405.

<sup>23</sup> Baobaid, “Masculinity and Gender,” 164; Don Conway-Long, “Gender, power and social change in Morocco,” in *Islamic Masculinities*, ed. L. Ouzgane (London, New York: Zed Books, 2006), 145; Willemse, “On Globalization,” 170.

<sup>24</sup> Asma Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam, Unreading Patriarchal Interpretation of the Qur’an* (Karachi: Sama, 2002), 184–186; Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Quran, Women and Modern Society* (Slough, Berkshire, UK: New Dawn Press, 2005), 48–49.

<sup>25</sup> Barlas, *Believing Women*, 186; Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam* (Karachi: Vanguard, 1992), 46. Chapter VI verse 31 of the Indonesian Marriage Law of 1974 officially declared the husband as the head of the family. This law remains the core legal document endorsed by the state that guides the practice of marriage and family, especially among Muslims in Indonesia.

<sup>26</sup> Engineer, *The Rights of Women*, 45.

<sup>27</sup> See Barlas, *Believing Women*, 185–186; Qaradawi, *The Lawful*, 205. The medieval Al Zamakhshari, supported by Al Razi, states that ‘qiwama’ is based on the natural quality of men granted by God ranging from intellect and determination to literacy and ability to ride. See Shaikh “Exegetical Violence: *Nushuz* in Qur’anic Gender Ideology,” 59. Even Maududi uses the words “Allah has made” men as “superior to” the other in his translation. See Rifaat Hassan, “An Islamic Perspective,” in *Women, Religion and Sexuality: Studies on the Impact of Religious Teachings on Women*, ed. Jeanne Becher (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications: The Pilgrim Press, 1990), 110. Yusuf Ali in his translation of the Qur’an commented that God has granted the “strength” to qualify men to maintain women. See Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur’an: Text, Translation and Commentaries* 2nd edn. (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an, 1988), 37.

<sup>28</sup> See for example Engineer, *The Rights of Women*, 3; Lily Z. Munir, “‘He Is Your Garment and You Are His ...’: Religious Precepts, Interpretations, and Power Relations in Marital Sexuality among Javanese Muslim Women,” *SOJOURN* 17 no. 2 (2002): 207; Khaled Abou el Fadl, *Speaking in God’s Name, Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: One World, 2001), 224.

<sup>29</sup> Barlas, *Believing Women*, 187; Engineer, *The Quran*, 46.

<sup>30</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, 72.

<sup>31</sup> S. M. Whitehead and F. J. Barrett. “The Sociology of Masculinity,” in *The Masculinities Reader*, ed. S. M. Whitehead and F. J. Barrett (England: Polity Press, 2001), 20.

<sup>32</sup> Syafiq Hasyim, *Understanding Women in Islam. An Indonesian Perspective* (Jakarta: International Centre for Islam and Pluralism, 2006), 55.

<sup>33</sup> Bob Pease, “Moving Beyond Mateship: Reconstructing Australian Men’s Practices” in *A Man’s World? Changing Men’s Practices in a Globalised World* ed. Bob Pease and Keith Pringle (London and New York: Zed Books, 2001), 196–197.

<sup>34</sup> Barlas, *Believing Women*, 7.

<sup>35</sup> Gerami, “Mullahs, Martyrs, and Men,” 258.