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## Between “Here” and “There”. Premarital Relationships, Family Control and Masculinities Among Migrants

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# **Between “Here” and “There”. Premarital Relationships, Family Control and Masculinities Among Migrants**

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Abstract: The article analyses how Moroccan Muslim migrants in Europe define their heterosexual premarital experiences and construct their masculinities by trying to combine two main social and educational scenarios: the context of the native country on one side, and their life abroad on the other. The contribution is based on results from qualitative research (based on semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations) involving young Moroccan migrant men aged 19-30 years old living in France and Italy. Through studying the case of different heterosexual mixed couples (formed by a Moroccan Muslim man with a non-Muslim European woman), the article shows how young migrant men cope with the fact of engaging in premarital relationships with a European girl abroad. Pre-conjugal sex, indeed, is presented by the interviewees as one of the practices which is the most difficult to reconcile with their identity as Muslims and with their Moroccan family socialisation. The paper especially analyses how, abroad, heterosexual young men elaborate specific arrangements with both sexual and religious norms, as well as with family bonds, in order to deal with a hegemonic model of “conjugal masculinity”.

Keywords: Family norms, masculinities, migration, premarital sexuality, religion

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## Introduction

Migratory paths are never just a matter of mobility. During migration practical and symbolic frontiers may become fluid and the distinction between “here” (the host country) and “there” (the native place) can be reconsidered producing new tensions. This article aims to analyse how, within this dialectic, premarital sexual experiences among Muslim Moroccan men may play a central role in shaping sexual experiences and gender identifications. In doing this, it particularly depicts how family religious education and socialization paths are bordering practices (Gerrard & Sriprakash, 2018) which participate in producing the social frames where young people’s intimate relationships are built and described abroad.

Indeed, for many years, sexuality, intimate life and gender have been considered rather peripheral questions within migration studies (Donaldson et al., 2009). More recently, they have started to become a core issue in the scientific literature (Abbatecola & Bimbi, 2013; Chossière, 2021; Manalansan, 2006; Wojnicka & Pustulka, 2019). Nowadays these questions are more and more explored through analysing how migratory paths shape masculine identifications, intimate relationships and religion practices (Cerchiaro, 2021; Gallo & Scrinzi, 2021; Maddanu, 2013). The present paper insists on this research perspective through a revision of some main results from a qualitative study with Moroccan Muslim men who have migrated to France and Italy<sup>1</sup>. The paper focuses on how young heterosexual men interpret premarital sexual experiences abroad, with a non-Muslim European woman, as a field to rethink their identity as men, Muslims and Moroccan especially within family relationships. The aim is to show how (hetero)sexual experiences and constructions of masculinity intersect with migration and educational paths to permanently re-signify frontiers with the home country and native belongings<sup>2</sup>.

Certainly, the dialogue between sexuality and gender identifications among Moroccan migrant men in Europe is not a totally unexplored question in sociology (Juntunen, 2002). There have already been some research among Moroccan young men or among migrants from Southern Mediterranean arriving in Europe, particularly in France and Italy. However, the most part of these studies are focused on non-heterosexual identifications and

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<sup>1</sup> The research was carried out between 2011 and 2016, but its main results were revised and updated during the last two years especially by focusing on the socialization experiences of the interviewees between Morocco and Europe (Fidolini, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> We will see that the notions of “home country” and “home culture” may take different meanings in the accounts of the interviewees: sometimes these notions may be identified with the family still living in Morocco; sometimes they may be identified with Islamic precepts; other times they are identified with the educational norms that family members try to “impose” to these young men abroad.

homoerotic practices (Gouyon, 2010; Rinaldi, 2020). On the contrary, both in France and Italy very few studies deal with heterosexuality and masculinities among Muslim migrants (Fidolini, 2023). In French sociological literature the interest had mainly been directed on the descendants of North African immigrants (Guénif-Souilamas & Macé, 2004; Shepard, 2018), especially because of the colonial past of France in North African countries. In Italy, where there had been a different history of colonisation and migrations, the first sociological studies on masculinity and migration appeared after 2010 (Carnassale, 2013; Della Puppa, 2013; Gallo & Scrinzi, 2016). Trying to fill a lack, this paper explores the relationship between sexuality, constructions of masculinity and migration experiences from the point of view of heterosexual men.

Even if this article will discuss intercultural relations between the members of a minority population (Moroccan migrants) and a majority one (in France and Italy), it is important to note that questioning racialisation process in itself is not the main purpose of the research. The objective is rather to question how cultural origins are used by these young men to justify their experience of sexuality in Europe while dealing with their plural backgrounds – their Muslim socialisation, their migratory experience, their relationship with family members (Fidolini, 2018). Some prominent studies carried out in France and Italy on Muslim migrants and Muslim second generations arriving from Southern Mediterranean countries have analysed the racialisation dynamics that characterise the representations of the “Islamic migrant men” in Europe (Ennaji, 2014; Mack, 2017). They have especially focused on the point of view of the majority population and the production of a racializing dominant discourse. These studies focus for example on how migrant young men are often portrayed as dangerous, a sort of permanent sexual threat to European Caucasian women, the perpetrators of an overflowing and unstoppable virility which is depicted as a true “risk” for women (Guénif-Souilamas, 2000; Guénif-Souilamas, 2013). These studies have also discussed how such a rhetoric has a role in essentialising the status of migrants, enhancing Islamophobia (Mack, 2017; Shepard, 2018). This process often ends up exacerbating the racialisation logics of which migrants are finally the victims (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2017). However, few studies have been interested in understanding how migrants – and especially Muslim migrant men from Southern Mediterranean countries – are not only passive actors in front of these discriminatory logics, how they can sometimes even cope with these same discriminations to negotiate their position abroad and to redefine concrete and symbolic relationships with the home country within migration (Hamel, 2003).

The analysis which are proposed in the present article focuses on this less explored perspective, and tries to show how premarital sexual relationships

and masculinities of young Moroccan men are constructed through the re-interpretation of stereotypes and discriminations. The fact that the young men who took part in the research were regularized at the moment of the fieldwork and that a majority of them had arrived in Europe especially as university students, coming from middle- or upper-class families of urban Morocco, contributed in developing such a perspective of study. Indeed, the young men often were in a proactive position in front of discriminations: their privileged profile was certainly different from that of other more disadvantaged migrant populations (including those who come from Morocco, from rural Morocco for example) which suffer in a stronger and more brutal way racialisation processes linked to a more complicated integration.

In the first part, the article will discuss the interest of studying the relation between Islamic heterosexual precepts and sexual conducts among young Muslim migrants in Europe. It will insist on the importance of investigating the relation that Moroccan migrants build with Islamic sexual precepts within family educational frames. This approach will allow to question how the distance from the home country and the home culture produce plural masculinities.

After the presentation of the fieldwork and the main methodological issues of the research, in the second part the article will analyse empirical case studies where Moroccan migrants deal with forbidden premarital sexuality with European women and Islamic prohibitions concerning non-conjugal intercourses. It will show how the value of the marriage and its family rites are plurally redefined between Morocco and Europe by shaping both education and socialisation paths of the interviewees. The article will end by describing how these dynamics shape the masculinities of these young migrants through analysing the role of the “conjugal heterosexual man”.

### **Questioning (Hetero)Sexuality and Islam**

Few studies explore the link between sexuality and religion among young heterosexual Muslims in Europe from the Southern shore of the Mediterranean (Hoque 2019). Nevertheless, the study of the relationship between youth, religion and heterosexuality is a core issue in Moroccan sociology of youth. Since the 90s many scholars started to analyse the impact of heterosexuality (as a dominant norm in Islamic religion, like in other monotheistic traditions) on Muslim identification among young people, especially during the transition to adulthood (Bourqia, El Harras & Bensaid, 1995; Dialmy, 2000). Indeed, in Morocco the transition to adulthood has consistently changed during the last thirty years in comparison to the former generations (Bouarbat & Ajbilou, 2007). Just forty years ago, the most part of Moroccan young people used to leave their parents at a very young age (16-18

years old) to get married or to find a job (Bourqia, 2000). Nowadays, on the contrary, young adults interpret their age as a phase of life where is possible to experience a postponement of the entry into the adulthood and into the marital sexuality (Dialmy, 2017). For these reasons, the experience of sexuality is permanently situated in the premarital (illicit) period, leading young Muslims to find alternative solutions to combine the needs of experiencing youth and those of respecting Islamic precepts (Beamish & Abderrazik, 2003; Dialmy, 2000). According to Islam, in fact, the only possible framework where experiencing sexuality is within the conjugal heterosexual union. Having sex outside the marriage is therefore both a common situation for these young people and a condition forcing them to reflect on their ways of being Muslims (Fidolini, 2016).

The efforts that young people carry out in order to combine their experiences of youth and their premarital illicit heterosexual practices seem even more interesting to analyse among Muslim migrant youth. Far from their country of origin, in fact, the young Moroccan who took part in the research seem to enjoy a greater freedom in the construction of their sexual conduct and choices. However, they interestingly also seem to look for new strategies in order to reengage – from abroad – with their belongings, their country and their religion. Obviously, the focus of this article is on the case of Moroccan Muslim men, and thus it offers only a partial view on the issue of premarital sexuality. Control over masculine sexuality is certainly less intrusive than control over premarital feminine sexuality. Men experience illicit sexuality before marriage with clear advantages in comparison with Muslim women in Morocco (Dialmy, 2017). A Muslim woman who loses her virginity before marriage is seen with greater suspicious in Morocco as her first sexual intercourse has not only a symbolic value but it is also inscribed in the female body in a more intrusive way. The rupture of hymen situates virginity loss on a physiological frame which has no equivalent for men, leading women to deal with more constrictive conditions (Naâmane-Guesous, 1996; Dialmy, 2014). However, by questioning the link between heterosexuality and its legitimisation by Islamic norms our study will shed light on the tensions which also structure the relationship with sexuality among Muslim men.

Moreover, this text deal with the case of self-declared Muslim men. During the research it proved very difficult to establish a univocal definition of Muslim Moroccan migrant because this would have meant being able to observe and measure the participants' ways of practicing religious beliefs in migration against a standard of reference (Melliti, 2010). That is why the research did not try to identify an "ideal" Muslim Moroccan migrant type, to which the researcher would then have compared each interviewee profile. In any case, the ways through which the Moroccan men who took part in

the fieldwork interpret their migrant identity are deeply linked with Muslim norms and their heterosexual setting. Muslim culture is a core point on which the interviewees tell about their sexual experiences and choices, and interpret their masculinity. Indeed, Islam defines forbidden sexual pleasure through the term *zinâ*, which means fornication. *Zinâ* refers to illicit vaginal penetration, or, in more legal terms, to any intercourse involving the genitals of someone over whom one does not have the rights of a husband (Benkheira, 1997). Sexuality is thus clearly conceived of in terms of a complementary and asymmetrical heteronormative man-woman relationship. As Abdelwahab Bouhdiba (1998) explains, in Islam, *zinâ* is viewed as the antithesis of *nikâh*, which refers to the licit framework of marital union. Finally, within the conjugal sphere sexual pleasure is not only admitted: It is even presented as essential, as it strengthens the relationship between husband and wife and, above all, takes up the divine cosmic order.

Yet, it is important to add that the concepts of sin and sexual prohibition have been developed within multiple interpretations of Qur'anic texts by scholars of Islamic law. The Muslim discourse on sexuality is precisely the result of multiple interpretations of the sources of Muslim religion – the Qur'an and the prophetic tradition (*sunnah*)<sup>3</sup> – that has stretched over a long period of time. The ways through which the interviewees I met describe and justify their sexual practices are based on these interpretations. They translate Islam (the religion) into individual and collective conducts which can vary across space and time, and are related in different ways to interpretations of the religion's founding texts (Lagrange, 2008). From this perspective, Islam can be defined as the history of the socio-cultural arrangements made by reality with the Islamic religion, which is itself made up of evolving norms. The Moroccan migrant men who took part in the research produce an umpteenth interpretation of these evolving norms through the process of meaning-making (Ahmed, 2016). Thus, this article will show how religious sexual norms are translated into lived experiences (Gross, 2005), reflecting some of the many forms of arrangements made by reality with religion precepts.

As we will see, religious norms, instead of having an exclusively coercive influence on the interviewees' behaviour and narratives, are also negotiated by these young Moroccan men. Moreover, religious norms do not only work on a singularised perspective by shaping the biographies of the young migrant men I met and their gender identifications: they also organise the conducts of the whole family group of these migrants (in Europe and in Morocco) through re-signifying both visible and invisible frontiers with the native country.

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<sup>3</sup> The tradition constituted by the recorded sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad.

## Materials and methods

This article is based on a revision of results from a study on a group of 45 young Moroccan men between 19 and 30 years old, who arrived in Europe during their adolescence<sup>4</sup>. At the time of the fieldwork (in 2011-2016), the young men who were university students or had left Morocco to study in Europe were also those who mainly came from urban centres in Morocco and had privileged social backgrounds. Those who came to France and Italy to seek for a job, alone or with their family, often had more heterogeneous social origins: some of them came from middle classes (from urban or rural Morocco); others came from lower class and had not necessarily attended high school education in the home country.

The study is based on semi-structured interviews with young Moroccan men living in two European regions: Grand-Est (France) and Tuscany (Italy). These regions were first selected because they are two privileged destinations for Moroccan immigration to Europe. In Grand-Est, Moroccans are (with Algerians) the largest migrant community from North Africa. The age pyramid of the Moroccan migrant population reveals a strong presence of young men aged between 20 and 40 years old (INSEE, 2016). Similarly, in Tuscany Moroccans constitute the largest migrant group from North Africa. The age pyramid also indicates a strong presence of young men aged between 20 and 35 years old (IDOS, 2019). The choice of these two regions is also based on the fact that the researcher had already conducted research on gender and sexuality among migrant young men in Tuscany and Grand-Est and, being bilingual French/Italian, he could carry out the interviews in these two languages with the interlocutors. During fieldwork the researcher did not use Moroccan Arabic to carry out interviews. In the rare occasions when the young men used Arabic words during interactions the researcher was always with Moroccan informants who translated the dialogues more or less simultaneously.

All of the conversations were recorded and took place in public spaces (cafés, university campus, public gardens) or private spaces (student apartments, shared flats)<sup>5</sup>. They lasted between 1 and 3 hours. All interviews were transcribed and, then, thematically analysed to identify the narrative patterns that were central in the accounts of the interviewees. During the fieldwork, the researcher also carried out 7 interviews with young Moroccan migrant women and young non-Moroccan women engaged in relationships with Moroccan men in Italy and France. As we will see, the aim of these

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<sup>4</sup> All of the interviewees declared to be heterosexual at the moment of the interviews. All of the names of the interviewees which are mentioned in this article are anonymized.

<sup>5</sup> All the interviewees gave their consent to record before the interviews.



interviews was mostly to throw light on the stories already gathered during the conversations with the young men.

The interviews were accompanied by ethnographic observations. Indeed, for a long period, between 2012 and 2015, the researcher spent time almost every day with some of the interviewees (especially with 13 men: 7 in Italy, 6 in France). The ethnographic strategy was oriented to build a relationship of trust with the interviewees so as to be able to talk with them about their sexual experiences without putting the researcher in the position of an external observer who seems to “steal” private information (Schlagdenhauffen, 2014). Questioning the construction of masculinity and the sexual experience of these young migrant men also meant that the researcher had to engage his masculinity as well as his migrant status (being an Italian abroad – when he was on the fieldwork in France – and an Italian who have migrated to France – when he was in Italy). He took part in conversations in which the masculinity of other young migrant men was assessed, judged and classified. The migrant history of the researcher was sometimes part of these judgments too. The researcher asked others for their stories and was himself subjected to homosocial assessments when, for instance, he was invited to play his role as a young heterosexual man (recognised as such by the interviewees) by overtly displaying his own flirting techniques. In those situations, the heterosexual performativity revealed its power over the gender order as well as its imitative reiteration (Butler, 1993): the different (dominant, complicit, subordinates) models of masculinity (Connell, 2005) performed within this order were thus apprehended through interactions, leading the researcher to study and observe gender in the making (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

The fact that the author of the article was spending a lot of his time on the field, that he had created relationships of trust with the young men he interviewed, and that he was a sort of peer, certainly made it easier for the young Moroccan men to verbalise with him their couple relationships. Yet, analysing their stories carried its own interpretative pitfalls. One major problem was that of “normative accounts” (Fidolini, 2017). This was especially the case when the researcher asked pointed questions about sexual practices. Many of the interviewees shielded themselves behind the normative distinction they clearly established between marital and non-marital sexuality. Such a dichotomy was justified by the interviewees through reference to the “respect” due to one’s wife and to the institution of marriage according to the precepts of Islam.

One of the aims of the study was to understand the influence of heterosexuality on the interviewees’ stories and gender performances to analyse the role played by heteronormativity: this purpose probably influenced the narratives of the interviewees. Moreover, references to the researcher personal experiences – which he used to facilitate the telling of the interview-

ees' stories – conveyed a model of “sexual engagement” of the researcher (Broqua, 2000) that most likely contributed to the reproduction of heterosexuality's hegemonic power (Allen, 2003). Faced with the impossibility of achieving neutrality, it was decided to accept the risks and advantages of this research posture. The analysis focused on the power that the heterosexual norm had in producing interactions between men and between men and women: in nightclubs, for instance, where some interviewees tried to make the researcher show his own seductive strategies with girls. From this perspective of study, mainly based on ethnographic observation within homosocial spaces, the heterosexual discourse produced a sort of attraction and, undoubtedly, a competition between masculinities. This competition was based on the logics of homosocial male bonding, in particular the complicity created when men display their heterosexuality in each other's company while seeking to meet the presumed heteronormative expectations of other men (Flood, 2008).

In the next paragraphs the article will discuss in particular three case studies that was selected because of their high representativity of the experiences of young men who were the object of long-term ethnographic observations throughout the duration of the whole research (2011-2016).

### **Premarital sexuality, gender identifications and family expectations**

The meaning of marriage as a “legitimate” context for the experience of sexuality have religious roots but it is firstly maintained by social relationships. The parents' view is particularly significant for the young Moroccan migrant men we met, especially when these young men are engaged in a premarital relationship with a non-Muslim European woman. The interviewees seem to be both concerned with the transgression of the endogamous norm and with the fact that they are engaging in illicit premarital relationships which are difficult to reconcile with their identity of Muslims. This issue leads them to rethink the meanings of family belongings (Vasquez del Aguila, 2014) while creating new transnational Muslim identifications.

### **The arrangements with religious bans and the patriarchal order**

Rachid, 24, is an engineering student in Florence. Born in a modest family from El Kelaâ des Sraghna, he came to Italy at 15 with his mother, his sisters and brothers, to reunite with his father who had come to Tuscany in the early 1990s. School played a fundamental role in Rachid's life in Italy. He spent all his high school years with the same small circle of Italian friends. During different conversations together, Rachid often told us that he had only started going out with Moroccans during his first year at university in

Italy, when he was 19 years old. Thanks to the Moroccan students from the faculty of engineering, he had “*rediscovered*” Arabic and Moroccan culture. He did not give up his relationships with his Italian friends at all and; on the contrary, he was one of the very few Moroccan men in Tuscany who was able to combine these two horizons of relationships. He often attended classes with his friends from Florence and then ate at the university cafeteria with his Moroccan group. He shared his time between these two worlds and tried to reconcile them together.

When we met Rachid he has been in a relationship for five years with a 22-year-old Italian young woman from Florence, Vanessa. His girlfriend had formed close bonds with Rachid’s Moroccan circle of friends. Through them, Vanessa had also become acquainted with Rachid’s sister, who studied biology at the university.

Everyone in the group of Moroccan students knew that Vanessa and Rachid were together, but when his sister was there all of the members of this group concealed their relationship and the couple never displayed any sign of affection – they never kissed, hugged or held hands. While Rachid thought this was “*normal*” behaviour, manifesting “*respect*” for a member of his family, Vanessa considered it as rather “*hypocritical*”. Rachid’s wish to maintain their relationship hidden was driven by fear of the way his parents would judge his relationship with an Italian, non-Muslim girl. In reality, even if both his mother and sister were perfectly aware of his relationship with Vanessa, Rachid tried to keep it hidden as he feared his father might reproach his “*sister and mother for being abettors to what he [his father] considers a crime*”.

Rachid had grasped from some words said by his mother that his father wished him to marry a Moroccan woman. Yet, Rachid had never had any conversation with his father about this. The family relationships had partially become organised around this unspoken frontier between father and son. The following story told by Rachid perfectly sums up the complex context in which he lives:

Once, I come home and he tells me [...] he uses the third person: “Today I went to the mosque downtown and I heard that you and your brother... what is it you do downtown?”. Well, in fact he had heard my brother and me talking about my girlfriend, but he didn’t tell me! So the go-between is my mother, and so she’s the one who says “You know, your father went to the mosque downtown and someone told him that you and your brother were with Italian girls” [...]. He doesn’t want me to be with an Italian girl, he follows religion, he knows that having a relationship before marriage means having sex outside marriage here in Europe, so he doesn’t want me to be in a relationship without being married.

Yet, Rachid himself also feels concern about his sexual premarital life with Vanessa. While he affirms that it is quite “*normal*” that members of the family belonging to different generations have divergent perceptions of sexuality and couple relationships, Rachid also considers Islam as an essential reference:

Each time you do it [have sex] you feel guilty. Let me tell you, it’s just like when you jerk off, it’s a sin [...]. With sex it’s the same thing! There’s a saying that when a man gets excited he loses two thirds of his brain, of rationality. What is it? “Guys think with their penis.” It’s true! I feel I’m straying away from the good Muslim way when I do that, and it’s not good, honestly, it’s not good [...]. Maybe being in Italy does not help me to be a good Muslim.

Rachid reproduces the stereotypical profile of the man who is not able to control his virility (Ferrero Camoletto & Bertone, 2009). Linking it to another practice he considers immoral, masturbation, he insists on the guilt he feels at transgressing religious precepts and how his role of Muslim man is affected by his sexual behaviour. His migrant status is finally taken into account in order to produce a specific interpretation of his intimate life abroad: he links his distance from the home country to his distance from the good Muslim profile and the permitted Muslim behaviour. Then, Rachid explains his strategies to deal with religious premarital prohibitions in Europe:

Rachid: We were on the bed [with his girlfriend] and we were laughing, horsing around, having fun. After a while I told her, “Listen, marriage is just a contract between two people, right?”. Then I took a piece of paper and signed the paper, both of us, as if to say, “OK, I married her” [...].

Interviewer: What did you write on the paper? If I may ask...

R.: Nothing much, like there’s written “I, Rachid and I, Vanessa, I promise...”, something like that [...]. The truth is we were laughing at first, but after, while I was writing, well [...] it was practically the kind of marriage that was done in Morocco at the time, it is the traditional marriage. If I feel like cheating on her, for example, I know there’s this paper and I think “if I want to do things right, I have to remember the paper, and on the paper there’s written that I’m married to her” [...] it makes me feel less guilty in the eyes of God.

The process of justifying premarital relationships relies on the same normative references (in particular the value attributed to traditional religious marriage) that Rachid is transgressing. Finally, it seems that the paper he signed brings him closer to the kind of couple relationship wished for by his father. Here again, the young man’s behaviour and narrative seem to be guided by two fundamental factors which shape Rachid’s masculinity and

migrant condition: the father's judgment (and the patriarchal control over the sexuality of the young man which aims to reproduce cultural endogamy [Vasquez, 2015]) and Rachid's personalised references to Islam. Furthermore, as the young man underlined it during the interview, what matters for his father is that he should never himself see him with Vanessa together. The behaviour of both Rachid and his father is often adapted in order to preserve the mutual ignorance of each other's actions they both agree to. This ignorance is based on mutual surveillance strategies (Vasquez, 2015). That is why, as Rachid narrates, when Rachid's father goes to have a walk in the neighbourhood in the evening, he tells everyone beforehand to make Rachid understand that he should meet his girlfriend at a distance from the area, rather than in front of the house as they usually do before heading downtown. These messages reach destination, and Rachid consequently asks Vanessa not to wait for him in her car in front of the house. During fieldwork we had the opportunity to directly observe that these strategies are also used when all the actors involved have to share a common space. Once, Rachid's sister organised a dinner party in a restaurant in Florence to celebrate her birthday. Vanessa had been invited and was the only Italian girl there. As usual, the couple was careful not to display their relationship so as not to attract the attention of the members of the family who were there. As Rachid later explained, his father probably knew that Vanessa was not just a friend of his daughter's, especially as in other occasions Vanessa had always been the only Italian girl invited.

The deal made in the family – respecting the unspoken – was confirmed: what mattered was not that the father be aware of the relationship but that he has never seen the couple together. In this way, indeed, the authority of the father is preserved, as is the son's subjection to it and to the Moroccan and Muslim cultural references that Rachid's father represents in the eyes of his son in migrant milieu. The tensions which characterise the dialogue between Rachid's life in Italy and his Moroccan-Muslim socialisation are reproduced within family context, where the new frontiers established between Rachid's way of life and his father's creed organise new individual and collective conducts.

### **Dealing with marriage and family expectations**

Other masculine strategies to deal with family Islamic norms may exist. Hamza (30 years old, Strasbourg) comes from Casablanca from a middle-class family and has arrived alone in France at 20 for his university studies. He has a master's degree in economics and is working in the civil service at the moment of the interview. He has been living with a young French woman for eight years. In order to fulfil his parents' wishes to see him married with

her, two years before he organised a trip to Morocco with his girlfriend and celebrated a marriage party there. This union has no official value, neither in Morocco nor in France, as no notarial act was drawn up during the ceremony. Moreover, Hamza and his girlfriend actually did not want to marry. For Hamza it was rather a way of pleasing his parents: “*It’s necessary to put everyone at ease. [...] It’s simply to keep up the appearances*”. Hamza emphasises his desire to meet the expectations of his parents who consider marriage as a step towards autonomy, and defines himself his marriage in Morocco as a sort of “public fiction” (Gallo, 2021) which allowed him to give a frame to his relationship in Europe in order to help his parents to accept it. Hamza was already independent economically – he thrives in his job and earns a good salary – but the fact his union with his girlfriend was not given recognition through a moment of shared celebration with his family in Morocco kept him from reaching autonomy in the area of his private life. Quite paradoxically, Hamza needed to celebrate the union in Morocco in front of his relatives to reinforce the distance with his home country and his family.

The independence effectively achieved through migration by Hamza was not considered enough by his parents for him to be regarded as an adult who is free to decide on his private and sexual life. He explains “*Before our celebration in Morocco, when someone called me at home, using my home phone – you know, in Morocco you have special price if you call on a fixed line – I must answer! Because if she [his girlfriend] answers when my parents are calling, they could say: why is this girl always there if they are not married?*”. His narrative suggests an interesting distinction between the religious value of marriage and family traditions:

Hamza: You know marriage in Morocco, the institution of marriage, in terms of religion it amounts to very little: the big thing is tradition. My parents they needed to mark the occasion, I didn’t but my parents did.

Interviewer: Ok, but during the ceremony there are some rituals to be respected, usually, I mean like reading the “Fâtiha”<sup>6</sup> for example.

H.: Yes, it’s important, we did that, but the real thing is tradition, it’s the celebration: getting henna and stuff, carrying the husband on a sort of throne, the procession. It’s tradition! Religion is tradition!

Tradition and its religious references between “here”, Europe, and “there”, Morocco, is expressed in the form of custom. The tradition is thus reinvented (Hobsbawm, 1983) to mark both continuity and discontinuity with a shared family past. Through this arrangement, two different generations with different expectations regarding marriage and private life can find common

<sup>6</sup> The first surah of the Qur’an which is read when conducting a religious marriage contract.

ground. On one side, Hamza's parents in Morocco can satisfy their desire to see their son married and his union legitimated through the traditional rite; on the other, Hamza can please his parents and free himself from their control, abroad.

### **Becoming an adult in the eyes of the relatives, being a man in the eyes of other men**

*“Being a man means taking responsibility, getting married, being in control. You're responsible for your family, making sure your kids are all right, your wife's all right”* (Issam, 24, Prato). We have heard this idea expressed countless times by the interviewees. The young men we met seemed to reproduce and confirm a hegemonic model of masculinity as achieved through marriage: what we called elsewhere a “conjugal masculinity” (Fidolini, 2018). We talk about hegemonic masculinity because this concept helps us in analysing the dynamics by which certain models of masculinity establish their dominance and regulate the construction of masculinities. Thus, any model of masculinity can be explored in relation to its persuasive power on individuals and can be observed both through the practices which concretely lead to its reproduction and those which, instead, challenge, refuse or negotiate the hegemonic model (Connell, 2005).

Although most of the interviewees were not yet married at the moment of the research<sup>7</sup> (and some of them do not want to marry at all, like Hamza), they often mentioned the perspective of their future marriage in their narratives. *“You're a man once you find your stability, you build up your own family, you have a house [...] Do you know that Islam says that marriage counts for half of the religion?”* says Houcine (26 years old, Strasbourg). The domestic home is confirmed as the space of *halâl* (hetero)sexuality according to the precepts of Islam, where a dominant masculinity can also express itself. Yet having your home is not so easy to achieve. Some interviewees do not have the financial means to make a home: this can have an impact on the process of construction of their masculinity and on their sexual experiences.

Badr (26, Strasbourg) comes from a family of peasant farmers. He was born in Nouasseur, a village near Casablanca, and came to France as university student. He followed a program in journalism and is now working in a PR firm. He lives near the house of his elder sister, who came to France before him and who is married to a Moroccan man. Badr confessed that because of her supervision of his private life he felt he had not yet become an adult man. Badr explained that the intrusiveness of his sister was probably due to the fact that he had not yet built his own home and, in the eyes of his

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<sup>7</sup> On our fieldwork we only met six men who were married.

relatives, remained a teenager. Badr's parents do not reside in France, but his sister compensates for their absence by playing the part of a substitute authority figure:

You see, if I have a hook up, the girl never comes to my place! 'Cause my sister comes from time to time, and if the girl forgets something just once, my sister will see it. She knows I date girls, that's also why she comes, to check [he laughs], but she always call me before coming...

His parents know everything about his behaviour because they hold regular conversations with his sister: "*she comes to check*", "*she reports on what I do! My parents ask her to do that!*". His sister had a key to his apartment – which belonged to her husband's family – and one evening, during a conversation together, Badr explained to us that very often his sister came to the flat to tidy up. The constant proximity to members of his family – and especially to his big sister – undoubtedly makes it difficult for Badr to fulfil himself as a man and an adult, so that he feels he is still a "*child*" in the eyes of his relatives. Again, marriage exerts a normative power on all the actors involved as a decisive milestone marking the transition to adulthood and the access to a legitimate masculine role. While Badr confesses he does not want to miss on the sexual opportunities offered by his youth and thus postpones marriage to a later phase of his life, he nevertheless continually associates his identity as a man to the conjugal masculine model the members of his family wish to make him adhere to. It is exactly on his dependence on the hegemonic model of a conjugal masculinity that he is able to justify and accept his sister's intrusiveness, which also seems to reverse the patriarchal family model by originally conferring to the sister the role of guardian over the conduct of the brother.

However, the hegemonic power of the conjugal model of masculinity does not only play a constrictive action for these young men. The representation of the conjugal masculinity as an accomplished model of man is also used differently. Badr, for example, declares that he also voluntary exalts it as a distinctive feature that might make him more attractive to European women. Masculinity through marriage becomes here a tool to make a distinction between him and the majority population while also protecting him from racialisation processes (Vasquez, 2015):

Arabs find it a little easier with girls in Europe [...]. Maybe it's the way we are, the way we behave, 'cause here, French guys are more... [...] for example we respect the girl, with your wife no one has the right to... she must be respected. The wife in our Muslim culture is the foundation of the family, a husband must always provide for his wife's needs, and most French women, with us, feel respected, they feel secure [...] more than with a European man.



The masculinity Badr refers to is based on the classic patriarchal model (Mitchell, 2002) where the man must prove his ability to “*provide for his wife’s needs*”. When he narrates an experience he had with his former French girlfriend and a group of friends of hers, Badr shows how the model of the conjugal masculinity may become a feature to compete against other masculinities abroad:

Sometimes I was forced to tell her [his girlfriend], “OK, I’ll buy you a drink”, ‘cause she was with her friends, she had Italian friends, English friends, everyone is drinking and she’s having a Coke with me [Badr, who is Muslim, does not drink alcohol]. Every time is Coke Coke Coke, so OK “I’ll buy you a drink”. But I won’t let anyone buy her a drink [...] no one has the right to do it, that’s an Arab thing! First I don’t like it when she drinks alcohol and I hate it when someone else buys it for her... Maybe it’s pride, I’m the one who should take care of my woman [...] When we [Arabs, Moroccan] go out with a girl then you know the difference ‘cause she tells you a little about her ex-boyfriends and then you see the difference, there’s a reason they [European girls] like to stay with us [Arabs, Moroccan], I mean go for something serious with us, getting married, having a family, and in my head that’s an asset, ‘cause we respect women, the wife is everything in our culture, it’s the foundation to build a family.

Badr draws on a storehouse of essentialist representations of Arab and North African Muslim masculinity which reproduce gender asymmetries while exalting heterosexuality as naturalized ability to provide for the woman’s needs within the patriarchal system. Yet, this model does not only express man’s dominant position in relation to women, but it is also used to establish a distinction between different profiles of masculinity, hegemonic and subordinated forms (Connell, 2005). Migrant (and especially Arab, Moroccan and Muslim) masculinity is described as providing a protective framework for a couple relationship, in contrast to what European men may provide to European partners. Using stereotypical images of religious marriage and naturalized representations of the masculine role within the conjugal union, a clear distinction is drawn between “us”, migrant men, and “you”, European men. In Badr’s account, this rhetoric also appears as a strategy to defeat the stigma (Hamel, 2003) attached to the minority population of Arab and North African young Muslim men who are often associated in mainstream discourse with the racialised image of young rapists, indulging in a wild and violent sexuality (Guénif-Souilamas & Macé, 2004; Shepard, 2008). By overturning the stigma, Badr reinterprets the discriminations he faces with as a Moroccan migrant through conferring them new meanings. His Arab origins and Muslim belongings are thus connected with a masculine feature that is presumed (according to Badr) to be appreciated by European women: its total devotion to women within the conjugal frame.

## Conclusion

The interviewees' narratives on their premarital experiences with European and non-Muslim women are strongly influenced by a binary heteronormative model. According to this model the complementarity of masculinity and femininity is maintained especially thanks to references to Islam and heterosexual marriage. Thus, the ways through which the interviewees display their belonging to family traditions and educational frames, Moroccan customs and Muslim culture, allowed us to question heterosexual masculinity and its plural forms of expression during migration according to three main perspectives.

First, the model of the "conjugal masculinity" is used by the interviewees to describe the experience of migration and the new frontiers that it builds. If marriage is understood by the families of these men as a prospect of future stability, for the interviewees it is a wider symbolic space where redefining their bonds with the native country, the Islamic culture, their families. In this way the interviewees build their premarital relations especially in order to deal with parental control, between Europe and Morocco. Cultural frontiers between "here", Europe, and "there", Morocco, are not just reproduced by these young men but also permanently reinterpreted in order to redefine their limits. In certain cases, the tensions between parental education priorities and the young men's actions are maintained abroad to obtain greater freedom through remaining dependent on parental control, as in the case of Rachid. In other situations, these tensions are used to run away from family control, as in the case of Hamza. In this context, the conjugal model challenges the masculinities of these young men. In fact, if on the one hand the interviewees seem to want to liberate their youth from conjugal responsibilities, on the other hand their narratives and their actions are often oriented towards the reproduction of a conjugal masculine role, even if in a different form as compared to the parents' expectations.

Second, the cultural references the interviewees use to confirm their attachment to marriage and conjugal masculinity are not fixed, coming from an unchanging Muslim or Moroccan heritage. They are rather flexible interpretative tools which can be adopted differently depending on the context of interaction and its participants, in family and outside. For some of the interviewees, like Rachid, the fact of looking for an alternative religious legitimation of his premarital relation with Vanessa also means trying to maintain inner links with the home country, with Islam and family education paths, while especially respecting his father's authority. In the case of Hamza, on the contrary, the references to the Islamic tradition seem to be above all a family convenience issue which is used to put his relatives at ease: Hamza

accepts to celebrate his union with his girlfriend in Morocco uniquely to obtain autonomy in his everyday life in Europe.

Lastly, well aware of others' expectations, the interviewees may sometimes choose to lay greater emphasis on their belongings in order to stage particular features of their masculinity. As in the case of Badr, the references to Arab, Moroccan or Islamic origins are used to emphasise the value that marriage has in his home country and culture, as well as his attachment to the model of a conjugal masculinity. The interviewee seems to deliberately essentialise his Moroccan and Muslim origins. His belongings, indeed, are used as tools to redefine the migrant identity abroad. This dynamic helps him to subordinate other masculinities in homosocial relations, especially by competing with men of the majority population. The possibility of being racialised because of his migrant status is thus anticipated by Badr and finally transformed in the opportunity of making of his migratory paths and Muslim belongings new features to exalt his origins in Europe.

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