
Designing for Domestic Abuse in Muslim Communities

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CHI'20, April 25–30, 2020, Honolulu, HI, USA
ACM 978-1-4503-6819-3/20/04.
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3334480.XXXXXXX>

Abstract

In this position paper, we highlight challenges and questions faced in our work on domestic abuse in a predominantly Muslim community. We examined the different forms of abuse women faced by family members and partners, how women exhibited agency and resistance, and the role technology played in their agency and resistance practices. We found sociocultural factors amplified forms of abuse, and women dealing with abuse through various ways of resisting and non-resisting acts that mitigated or demolished consequences of the abuse, often aided by technology.

Author Keywords

Islamic, feminism, domestic abuse, HCI4D

CCS Concepts

•Human-centered computing → Human computer interaction (HCI); Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing;

Introduction

In the current wave of contemporary HCI, cultural understanding and values are a focus of researchers and designers [21]. As we, HCI scholars, come to realize the interconnectedness of the world, our interests and literature become more nuanced, and further understanding continuously develops around the global impact of technology and

design [21, 19, 13]. In this position paper, we discuss the concept of Islamic feminism, and propose questions to the community on how to better engage with, study, and design for non-Western contexts using Islamic feminism as a frame for research and design. We pull from our experiences in studying domestic abuse within a Muslim community.

Literature Review

In this literature review, we give an overview of Islamic feminism history and definitions, how Islamic feminism addresses domestic abuse, and HCI efforts incorporating feminist and Islamic feminist approaches.

Islamic feminism: Feminist theory continues to evolve to fit different contexts than where it originated¹. One divergent of feminism is Islamic feminism. The term Islamic feminism emerged in the 1990s in writings [24] and movements [6]. Islamic feminism is not universally defined [17]; however, the core of Islamic feminism is “a concept, attitude, and activism to revise gender roles from an Islamic perspective” [4], offering a new interpretation of Islam and gender based on *ijtihad*². An opposing view to Islamic feminism is secular feminism, which takes a stance against patriarchal systems and views Islam in itself as patriarchal [17, 3]. Nonetheless, some scholars view the tension between sects of feminism as beneficial in helping define Islamic feminism [17].

¹Gender, T. (n.d.). History and Theory of Feminism. Retrieved from http://www.gender.cawater-info.net/knowledge_base/rubricator/feminism_e.htm

²*Ijtihad* is “the technical term that refers to the process of independent reasoning that scholars, but also nonscholars, may choose when a legal precedent is not immediately clear and available” [10] or “the production of social, legal and political frameworks through the interpretation of Islamic texts” [17, 11]

Two approaches are taken by Islamic feminists; they either work within an orthodoxy to change the position of women in society or work hermeneutically within the frame of Islam itself [17, p.350-351]. Amina Wadud is among the leading figures in the latter approach, where she reinterprets gender-biased Islamic heritage to emphasize gender equity instead [26, 25]. Wadud also participated in public movements provoking long-held gendered beliefs, such as the controversy around women leading congregational prayers [14]. Examples on working within an orthodoxy include the Iranian women movement, where historical facts of Prophet Muhammad and the women in that era were used to reassert women’s position in the Iranian society after the Islamic revolution. Movements in the Maghreb nation (Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria) aimed to fight the institutionalization of discrimination against women and their subordination within the home [6], calling for reforms in family laws and personal status versed in Islam. Groups such as Sisters of Islam (SIS) in Malaysia took it as their duty to lobby their government to criminalize domestic violence, regardless of the ethnicity or religion of the abuser [24]. Such movements allowed for patriarchal myths to slowly dismantle and reposition women in the public space [17, 2].

Topics addressed by Islamic feminist scholars include and are not limited to reform [26], gender [26], sexuality [18], marriage and divorce [18, 26], motherhood and family [26], democracy [27], resistance [1, 12, 9], and piety and agency [16, 15, 22]. By giving an overview of Islamic feminism, we present the range of facets that could be relevant to the HCI community. Next, we present HCI literature combining feminism and design.

HCI and Feminism: In contemporary HCI, feminism has had a strong presence in informing research and design [20, 7, 8]. Islamic feminism, however, has not been widely dis-

cussed in HCI. Among the few, Alsheikh and colleagues drew on multicultural approaches and Islamic feminism in interpreting their data [5]. Another study by Bunni and colleagues used Social Network Analysis (SNA) to examine the forms of Arab feminism on Facebook, which they divided according to specific markers (Table 1 in [3]) into Arabic, Sect, Non-Western, and Western feminism, and transnational projects [3]. Lastly, Sultana and colleagues examined what design entails in patriarchal systems using a feminist HCI approach [23]. With this, it is evident that Islamic HCI has further space for exploration.

Challenges and Concluding Thoughts

In our recent work studying domestic abuse within a Muslim population, and the role technology played in mitigating the consequences of the abuse, we found several opportunities for design. For example, the need for an independent financial service for women to save money away from the abuser while also circumventing the legal need to have written permission from a husband or father to open a bank account. Also, the need for Islamic feminist content listing definitions of abuse, women's rights, and ways to counter the abuse, all from an Islamic perspective. Such content would aid in the process of recognizing abuse, mitigate consequences of abuse through awareness using an Islamic grounding, and help mobilize on-the-ground efforts of feminists. We also highlighted areas where design may not be the best approach; for example, alerting officials and help-seeking on public virtual platforms using identifying information may exacerbate the situation.

During the study, we faced several challenges. On a methodological level, the sensitivity of the topic and the population lead to precautions in phrasing questions, recruitment, and sampling. Concerns such as the social tendency to hesitate to speak to a stranger about private matters, and the

possible unease of talking to a woman (*i.e.*, the first author) from the same home country, fearing exposure to someone who may know them or their families. In response, we tried to build trust by offering the option to meet in a private space if preferred, and ensuring all privacy measures of the study were mentioned before starting the interview. Also, we started our meetings by offering refreshments and snacks, starting a casual conversation, and leaving space for participants to express any concerns before the start of the interview. The prior considerations and recruiting through a university club channel and using snowball sampling helped build rapport and jumpstart the conversations. Further, we framed questions in our interview guide to address the participant or "someone she intimately knew", the rationale being it would allow participants to distance themselves from the story had they felt the urge to do so. Another concern was the possibility of limiting our access to participants had we explicitly mentioned domestic abuse as our topic in the interview invitation. This concern stems from the common cultural perception of domestic abuse as being mostly physical violence. Thus, a workaround was to broaden the topic to be around safety concerns within the home.

Questions we would like to discuss with the community include the following: as scholars, how do we address the contentious topic of domestic abuse when religious and cultural definitions and outlooks of what domestic abuse entails are vastly different? Shall we design for commonalities amongst Islamic schools of thought or take a more progressive route solely through Islamic feminism thought?. Also, how do we include experts on domestic abuse interventions (*e.g.*, social workers) when approaches may differ amongst countries and communities? For example, do we build on faith-based interventions, and can they be effectively merged in technology?. Finally, how do we practi-

cally test the usability of the design in the wild? How can we measure the impact of designs tailored towards wicked social problems?.

On a broader level, given the topic of Islamic feminism being relatively new in HCI. We admire specialized initiatives, such as the Islamic HCI workshop, and encourage further formal and informal collaborations amongst scholars and community members to allow for a rich and space to discuss needs and issues as they arise. As a fellow scholar, I seek to expand the conversation on how can we as researchers address sensitive or contentious issues from an Islamic feminist perspective; in an authentic and more nuanced way, while standing in multiple circles (e.g., Muslims, scholars, Western venues) and concurrently without offending others within those circles.

Open Questions for the Workshop:

Q1: How to address contentious topics in the Islamic community through HCI?

Q2: How to adapt suitable social work practices within HCI to address domestic abuse?

Q3: How to design, test, and measure the impact of design on wicked social problems?

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