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Masculinity in the Workplace: Iranian Women Engineers' Navigations of Hyper masculine Work Cultures

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Abstract

This paper delves into the work narratives of women engineers in the Islamic Republic of Iran to gain a better understanding of how gendered constructions of engineering careers are navigated by them. Iran's formal labor market is heavily male dominated, and women are systematically discouraged from working in traditionally masculine careers such as engineering. While gender segregation in Iran's labor market is mainly discussed in relation to state-imposed patriarchy, this study digs deeper into this issue by exploring the experiences of women who transgress boundaries into masculine careers. Drawing on in-depth interviews with women who work as on-site engineers, I show that these women mainly experience their workplaces as uncontested venues for men's performances of hegemonic masculinity. However, their strategies of resilience in face of these struggles were shaped by what I call "creative participation in the gender system" rather than efforts for dismantling gender hierarchies at a macro level. I argue that in contexts where institutional mechanisms for empowering women in the workplace are missing, close attention to such alternative forms of resilience and empowerment are necessary for a realistic understanding of how gender operates in the workplace.

Keywords: women; engineering; masculinity; workplace; patriarchy; Iran

Introduction

This paper explores the work narratives of women who work as on-site engineers in the Islamic Republic of Iran in order to deepen the understanding of how they navigate and negotiate with the masculine constructions of their careers. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran had enormous impacts on women's lives, including their work opportunities. The post-revolutionary Islamic Republic relied on an essentialist gender discourse—emphasizing women's family roles and channeling their sites of education and work into feminine domains, especially health, care, and education—as a part of its anti-Western modernization mission. Quota systems have been placed in different forms and to various degrees in the past four decades to limit women's entrance into engineering fields (Shahrokni & Dokoohi, 2013), and some majors, such as mining, electrical, and mechanical engineering, are exclusive to men in some universities. The country's labor market is overwhelmingly male-dominated, similar to other countries in the region, and improving women's employment is mostly deprioritized within the overarching policymaking, owing to the country's larger economic and political struggles. The existing nondiscrimination labor laws are not enforced in workplaces, and women are not protected from severe inequalities. Jobs are heavily sex-typed on employers' ends, and women are not given the chance to apply for some positions (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

The post-revolutionary gender policies have reinforced the gendered constructions of jobs considerably, and have hindered the improvement of conditions for working women, especially in non-traditional sectors. However, the current academic and journalistic accounts of women's work and employment in the post-revolutionary context are so preoccupied with the state's patriarchy that less attention is paid to women's perceptions of and experiences with burdens to their ability to transgress gender boundaries in the workplace. This paper is an attempt to bridge this gap by exploring the on-the-ground experiences of women working as on-site engineers using qualitative data from 30 interviews with these women.

Work has long been conceptualized as a gendered arena, a venue for production and reproduction of boundaries between masculinity and femininity, and sustaining the gender hierarchy (Acker []; Silva, 2008).

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The narratives of the women in this study provided a clear picture of how men's practices of hegemonic masculinity operate to marginalize them in the workplace. The underlying culture of the engineering sites that made them major venues for the achievement and performance of masculinity (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Ely & Meyerson, 2010) shaped the core of these women's descriptions of their work experiences. Women's understandings of what it takes to succeed in engineering fields were centered on the ability to strategically bargain with masculinity in the workplace. Their strategies of resilience and self empowerment were shaped by what I call "creative participation in the gender system;" strategies that, while not transforming social constructions of masculinity, served as the only alternative empowering mechanism in a lack of broader structural support for these women. These strategies are particularly important to understand in contexts like Iran where the larger structural and discursive settings for protecting women against discriminations are missing.

In the following sections, I will first review the previous research that informs my conceptualization of engineering sites as venues for the performance and achievement of masculinity. Next, I will describe the research methods, followed by three sections that present the findings. Finally, I will discuss the theoretical implications of the findings and provide concluding remarks.

Masculinity and Women's Gender Transgressions in Work

Research on masculinity at work has conceptualized workplaces as venues for the production and performance of hegemonic masculinity (Fernaldo et al., 2018; Rap & Oré, 2017; McIlwee & Robinson, 1992). Hegemonic masculinity refers to the normative image of manhood produced by cultural and institutional processes and performed, achieved, or aspired to (West & Zimmerman, 1987) by men at an interactional level. Hegemonic masculinity is often marked by features and values such as a preoccupation with status and dominance; exhibiting toughness; avoiding soft emotions and behaviors; self-reliance; aggressiveness; risk-taking behaviors; and hyper-competitiveness (Dellinger, 2004; Martin, 2001; Glick et al., 2018). While previous research has suggested that different contextual factors hegemonize different forms of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity is always constructed around an "active struggle over dominance" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005); it ties in the achievement of masculinity with one's ability to express dominance over the surrounding people (women or men) or conditions.

Workplaces with highly masculine cultures enforce men to not only engage in practices and behaviors that are culturally understood as masculine as an integral part of their careers, but also to seek to outperform others in masculine performances (Ely & Kimmel, 2017; Berdahl, 2018; Glick et al., 2018). Research suggests that such cultures make men vulnerable to the precariousness of masculinity by creating an environment where men are pressured to constantly prove characteristics that speak to the hegemonic constructions of masculinity or otherwise face the social and psychological insecurities of failing to feed the normative images of manhood and thus professional success (Ely & Kimmel, 2018; Acker, 1990; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Kolb et al., 2003; Martin, 2003).

Masculinity is precarious in the sense that the work of proving one's status as a "real man" is never fully done (Berdahl et al., 2018; Vandello et al., 2008). Manhood is difficult to achieve and yet easily lost via social messages that threaten men's sense of their masculine self and their position within the gender hierarchy (Vandello et al., 2008). As some scholars have argued, the prevalence of risky and unhealthy behaviors among men—such as aggression, harassment of women and other men, sexual violence, and homophobic behaviors—emerges from the pressure to constantly achieve and claim their masculine status (DiMuccio & Knowles, 2020; Rubin et al., 2020; Baaz & Stern, 2009).

Manhood is not an inherent psychological entity, nor is it a natural attachment to men's bodies. Rather, it gains meaning from interactional signals and cultural messages that approve certain traits, acts, and behaviors as manly, thus entitling men to the privileges of manhood (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Women's entry into traditionally masculine fields and their success in doing "men's jobs" can invoke feelings of threats to not only men's exclusive access to these domains, but also the credibility and status that emerges from their everyday achievements of masculinity (Chiou et al., 2013; Diamond, 2004) through doing types of work that are culturally perceived as exclusively manly (Vandello et al., 2008; Ely & Kimmel, 2018). In this sense, women's transgressions into masculine fields, especially in male dominant fields with highly masculine culture unsettle the routines and norms shaped around the all-maleness of such work environments in addition to men's the behaviors men engage in to perform masculinity and sustain their masculine status.

Gender, as scholars such as Ridgeway and Correll (2004), West and Zimmerman (1987), and Lorber & Farrell (1991) have argued, is a master status and an un-attachable part of identity. It is constantly "done" and "accomplished" at an interactional level (West & Zimmerman, 1987), and serves as a "primary cultural frame" that organizes social behaviors (Ridgeway, 2009).

Since paid work constitutes a large portion of men's lives—especially in contexts like Iran, where women's labor force participation is significantly lower than men's—it expectedly provides a unique venue for daily doings and accomplishments of masculinity (Martin, 2001). This study provides insights on how this interconnectedness of masculinity and work is experienced and navigated by women working in highly masculine jobs in a male-dominant labor market.

Methods

This study relies on an inductive approach using a qualitative methodology. I conducted 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews with women who were working as on-site engineers (i.e., either in industrial or construction fields) in fall 2015 in two major cities in Iran: Isfahan and Tehran. The participants held degrees in a range of disciplines, including mechanical, civil, industrial, computer, chemical, and electrical engineering. Twenty-six of the women were in their late 20s or early 30s, and were single. Among the married participants, three had children, and only one was older than 30. All of the women expressed belonging to middle- or upper-class families. The participants' length of employment at their current workplace ranged from less than one to six years. Three women held middle- or upper-level management positions, and the rest held positions as directors or associates. Regardless of their organizational rank, participation in field activities was an integral part of all of their work.

As has been established in the scholarship on gender and work, gendered constructions of work are sustained through cultural mechanisms that inform and enforce individual day-to-day participations in the gender system (Matin, 2003). Semi-structured interviews were commonly used in the previous literature as tools for exploring these types of gendered and gender-related work narratives (Martin, 2003; Sattari & Sandefur, 2018; Connell, 2010; Forssberg et al., 2020). The interviews in this study were designed to elicit narratives that would help deepen the understanding of how masculinity manifested in women's day-to-day institutional and interpersonal experiences and how they interpreted and navigated it. Since these women were working in male-dominated and hypermasculine environments, their navigations of masculinity became the dominant theme of the interviews.

The interview protocol for this study included questions such as: *What does it mean to you to be a female on-site engineer in the cultural context of Iran? To what extent, and in what ways, does your gender have an impact on how your workdays go? How do you deal with male and female co-workers?* Through these questions, Icreated a space for women to reflect on the embeddedness of masculinity in how they experienced their work; it was also an analytical opportunity to view women's work narratives in the context of Iran using gender—rather than state's patriarchy—as the theoretical lens.

I used my personal connections with a few female engineers, owing to my background as an engineering student and worker in Iran, to schedule the initial interviews. These women then introduced me to their fellows in the same or different organizations who were involved in on-site activities for further interviews. In addition to personal connections, I visited Isfahan's institute of construction engineering, which hosts a large number of construction inspectors who are all engineers. They introduced me to a few of their well-known and professionally successful female engineers, who agreed to participate in the study. I continued the recruitment until theoretical saturation was reached and no new theme emerged from the analysis of the interviews (Morse, 2004).

Most of the interviews took place in women's work fields, with their consent, which provided an opportunity for observations of women's working conditions. In three cases, interviews took place in coffee shops or public green parks, and one interview was conducted over the phone. Interviews lasted between 50 and 90 minutes; all were tape-recorded, manually transcribed, and coded using thematic analysis as the main approach. Coding involved two rounds of open coding for line-by-line readings of transcripts and the development of codes. This was then followed by a round of theoretical coding to elucidate the theoretical implications of the emerging themes. Pseudonyms are used when quotes from particular interviews are used in the presentation of the findings.

Findings

In this section, I discuss the main themes that emerged from my analysis of the interviews. My analysis revealed that women's day-to-day work experiences were shaped by their navigations of problematic masculinity practices and behaviors that were normalized in their work environments. Participants discussed various behaviors and incidents that, in their views, were intended to "sexualize" women's professional lives and to allude to women's lack of fit for the environment.

Interestingly, however, the women's strategies of resistance against these struggles were not fed by intentions to "undo" the gender system through behaviors and practices that transform gender norms and values. Instead, they found empowerment in what I call "creative participation in the gender system," or their ability to strategically deploy their gender knowledge to reduce men's resistance to their work.

Sexualized Professional Lives

Sexualization of women's bodies and behaviors in workplace settings is one way for men to express hegemonic masculine identities and maintain a higher status in the gender hierarchy. Previous studies highlighted the prevalence of sexualization women face in engineering. Fernando et al. (2018), for example, showed how female engineers working at mechanical and petroleum engineering sites feel "sexually visible" and yet professionally invisible in a culture that features the normalization of masculinity. Likewise, in their study of women in irrigation and water engineering in Nepal, Liebrand and Udas (2017) observed that women are pushed outside of the cultural boundaries that produce the image of an "engineer" through treatments and practices that objectify them.

The women in my study also discussed different aspects of their exposure to this process of sexualization. In fact, experiences and feelings of being sexualized were central to how all of them described their working conditions and understandings of what it meant to be an engineer as a woman. Azadeh, a young, passionate architect with a long and successful work history, who was running her newly established company and working as a part-time adjunct faculty member, described the situation young women architects face as inevitably imbued with the possibilities of sexualization by men in positions of power:

In many large and famous companies, male managers and CEOs have no shame in reaching out to their female employees for sexual relationships. Many of them are well-known in Isfahan for this. I always tell my female students to be cautious about such issues when they do internships. I want them to at least have this in mind, because when I was at their stage, I did not realize the meaning behind certain behaviors.

Along the same lines, Anahita, a chemical engineer at an international corporation in Tehran, stated:

All three of my supervisors are married, but as a woman, if you accept becoming more intimate with them, they give you better support. Even male employees know this about one of them and make jokes. I do everything I can so that I do not have to deal with him.

In both Azadeh's and Anahita's accounts, the sense of entitlement to sexually approach women was central to their experience of the construction of "managerial" masculinity at their workplaces. Such performances of masculinity appeared to be so normalized within those work cultures that they could simply elicit humor among men (and possibly women) or serve as a rationale for women like Azadeh, who were more advanced in their careers, to caution early-career women against certain organizations.

Problematic approaches from men were not limited to managers. Women also had issues with men in similar or lower ranks. For example, Raha, a mechanical engineer and the director of her company's engineering department in Isfahan, recounted:

At some point, I had to separate my job and personal lines. I was constantly receiving unnecessary phone calls from male colleagues outside of work hours.

When I asked Raha to delve deeper into what she meant by unnecessary, she described how the visibility attached to being the only woman in most of the places she visits during (e.g., factories and constructions sites) might invoke men's curiosity about her personal life or create assumptions about her openness to interacting with men in more personal and informal forms outside of work hours. Raha's experience also shows how assumptions about women's availability and approachability are integrated into men's expressions and performances of masculinity in relation to their female colleagues. These assumptions, of course, cannot be understood without taking into account the power relations that underlie gendered performances and expressions in the context of work. The impunity of men's problematic approaches to women as narrated by these three women can only be understood through the lens of unequal gendered power relations—both intersecting with and independent from organizational power—that determine who gets to do what and in what form in the context of work.

Another manifestation of women's experiences of sexualization was that their relations and interactions with male colleagues were extremely scrutinized and misinterpreted. These sensitivities were particularly consequential for women when they expected promotions or other forms of recognition. Andisheh, a highly accomplished chemical engineer who was working in a research center at the time of the interview, recounted one of these experiences in her previous workplace in manufacturing:

When your colleagues envy your advancement, they put unfair obstacles in your way. I was getting a promotion after developing a new formula for the factory's products. My boss called me into his office and said there is a rumor circling around that I often get a ride home from Mr. X [referring to being in a secret intimate relationship].

Similarly, Soolmaz, an electrical engineer working as the director of the quality control department in a large factory in Isfahan, mentioned:

It is very hard and heartbreaking for a woman to be accused of being in [a sexual] relationship with her boss. They say such things to push you out, especially when you are successful in your position.

Accounts like this show how women's efforts toward career advancements evoke pessimism about their professionalism. The women described the visibility that came with their achievements and stories of successes as catalysts that unsettled the cultural layout underneath the hierarchy of masculinity and femininity, which led to practices and efforts from men to redirect women's professional visibility into "sexualised visibility" (Fernando et al., 2018). This atmosphere was also reported in other studies that have explored the constructions of masculinity in male-dominated workplaces (Ainsworth et al., 2016; Hannagan, 2016; Benya, 2017; Pogrebin & Poole, 1997, 1998). As previously mentioned, the precarious nature of masculinity makes it vulnerable to cultural messages and material realities that destabilize the gender hierarchy (DiMuccio & Knowles, 2020). Azadeh's and Andisheh's quotes above echo masculine sensitivities to women's professional visibility in careers and responsibilities that are culturally constructed as masculine.

Women's professional lives were also sexualized through men's collective day-to-day expressions and navigations of masculinity. For example, women discussed how "locker room" types of behaviors and practices among men transformed their work environments from professional to sexualized atmospheres in which they did not feel welcome and secure. Gregory (2009) defined the locker room as a "safe space for men to discuss their ideas about their values, motivations, fears, desires, wives, girlfriends, mistresses, sexuality, career, and family on a personal level" (p. 326). Some women in this study discussed witnessing men playing pornographic videos on their cellphones or overhearing sexualized language. In one of the focus groups, Nasim, a civil engineer and executive director of a construction project in Isfahan, stated:

The other day, I was checking out some stuff in one of the building floors and noticed a couple of workers were watching a porn video and saying disgusting things!

Previous research has suggested that there is a connection between the consumption of pornography and the social construction of hegemonic masculinity (Garlick, 2009). Based on experiences like Nasim's, engineering sites could serve as venues for men to collectively navigate the shared cultural sphere and system of meanings that produce masculinity. Men's engagement in such collective navigations could be purposefully geared toward alienating women, or otherwise, as was the case in Nasim's account, pursued as routine practices of spending and sharing time with other men. Regardless of the possible reasons, the collective masculinity navigations produced spatial and temporal boundaries that constrained the women's mobility. For example, Azadeh described the differences between men and women engineers in terms of their ability to visit sites:

When you design a structure, it is a real privilege if you can do regular site visits and be present in on-site [informal] meetings. You can get the information you need easily with a site visit. Otherwise, it takes you forever to gather information from others. Most often, sites are in the suburbs, and more than one hour of driving outside the city. For men, it is easier to jump into their car and drive to the site at any time, during the work hours or after. For women, however, it is more difficult to manage this. If you go by yourself, there is no guarantee of your safety. All workers are male, and most of the time, there is no guard. Men do not have to worry about these issues, and this saves them a great amount of time and energy.

The women's accounts in this section reveal how their professional lives are sexualized practices and processes that turn their working environments into sites for the production and reproduction of masculinity. Men's navigations of masculinity were manifested in the forms of sexual harassment, unwanted sexual attention, stalking, false allegations, and scrutinization, which transformed engineering sites from supposedly rational, gender-neutral entities into venues for the production and performance of masculinity.

Exclusionary Masculinity

Women shared numerous experiences that featured men's engagement in exclusionary practices of masculinity. I use the term "exclusionary masculinity" to refer to language and behaviors men pursue to deem women and femininity unfit for engineering fields.

These are practices and behaviors that are not only masculine—based on the social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which they emerge—but are also purposefully pursued to allude to women's lack of fit for the environment; to create a space in which stereotypically feminine traits, such as physical sensitivities and softness, are associated with weakness and a lack of fit. My participants reported numerous exposures to men's practices of exclusionary masculinity.

One common example was men's intention to exploit women's hesitation to ride crane towers while at sites, because working with mechanical tools and devices are predominantly masculine activities, and women often have no or limited experiences similar to riding tall crane towers before entering into these jobs. As Saghar, a civil engineer in Isfahan and the director of one of the largest private-sector construction projects in the city, described:

Many men wanted to make an impression that the job naturally did not suit me. They would jump on the crane, visit the top floors, and then would come down and discuss the technical issues among themselves. There was no way for me to participate in the discussion without seeing the details for myself.

Saghar had managed to overcome her fears and ride the crane after a few months into her position. However, her quote shows how the limitations women inherit from gendered patterns of socialization can fuel men's strategies for maintaining the gender hierarchy in the context of the workplace, thus perpetuating gendered constructions of work through interpersonal dynamics.

Exclusionary performances of masculinity were also manifested in more direct actions or behaviors from men with the intent to intimidate or explicitly denigrate women. Participants' stories of being teased or intimidated by men provided examples of how their working environments were constructed as men's domains and how women were pushed outside the symbolic boundaries of belonging. For some participants, this process was manifested in men's attempts to question their competence and ability to resolve technical problems when they arise. Andisheh's experience provides one example:

I was working on my experiments in the lab, and suddenly, the instrument went off. The first thing that came to my mind was a power outage, but I saw that all the other machines in the manufacturing salon were working just fine. I checked the circuit breakers, and one of them had cut off. I switched it back on, but on my way back to the lab, I saw a couple of male workers whispering and giggling. I did not say anything, but after two or three minutes, the same thing happened, and I noticed the same people were whispering. I asked them if they had touched the fuse box, and they said no! there must be a power outage! I don't know what they were taking me for! How could I not notice that everything but my lab instruments was working just fine? I talked to their supervisor [an engineer with a master's degree], and he pretended to be surprised, and assured me that they will be punished. After a few months, I learned that the supervisor was behind the whole story. I just cannot understand why educated men get threatened by women getting jobs in their similar ranks.

Martin (2001) used the term "mobilizing masculinity" to refer to "practices wherein two or more men concertedly bring to bear, or bring into play, masculinity/ies" (p. 588). Martin observed ten different forms of behaviors among men that featured mobilizing masculinity, ranging from practices of affiliation through visits with each other in informal settings to expropriating other people's labor and acting collectively to redirect the credit from others' work (especially women) to themselves. One pattern in Martin's model that describes Andisheh's and Saghar's experiences above is "domination," which concerns men's collective attempts to withhold resources and information from women in order to discourage them or hinder their advancement. The particular situations that Andisheh and Saghar discussed above appeared to be shaped by men's intentional and collective behaviors to target their credibility and reliability for performing the technical work, and, as they believed, were strategies the men pursued for the purpose of maintaining their dominance.

Participants shared more extreme narratives of being targeted by men's practices of mobilizing masculinity and expressions of domination that went beyond work-related interactions and activities. For example, Sooreh, an architect in Isfahan, mentioned:

Sometimes to scare or threaten you, workers do things as crazy as flattening your tire or scratching your car. I have seen all of these things with my own eyes. To push you out of the competition, deteriorate your status, and take your place, they do everything. Along a similar line, Soolmaz, an electrical engineer in Isfahan, recounted:

There were many times that workers or technicians tried to intimidate me with things as silly as a lizard or roach. I am scared of insects to death, but I had to hold my breath while shaking inside or pretend that I do not care.

Ainsworth et al. (2014) used the term "problematic masculinity" to refer to those behaviors and patterns among men that are not only masculine, but are also directly and explicitly damaging to women. All of these behaviors observed among different groups of men in distinct social settings are manifestations of hegemonic masculinity, which, as I discussed before, is shaped around collective- and individual-level tendencies to dominate and control. While hegemonic masculinity does not have to be expressed through explicitly damaging behaviors toward women, toxic and problematic patterns of masculinity are predominantly observed among men who are challenged in some way to fulfill the ideal images of a 'real man' or who perceive their privileged masculine status to be under threat (DiMuccio & Knowles, 2020).

Kim (2015), for example, observed the emergence of a "masculinity crisis" among male factory workers in China as an outcome of the broader local and global transformations that have given birth to a group of "industrial underclass" men. Kim argued that these men are positioned to engage in violence and harassment against female factory workers—who, owing to the feminization of production work in China, are likely to enjoy better opportunities in these jobs—as ways to deal with the "anxieties" and "confusions" of their fragile social, economic, and gender status in their transformations into industrial factory worker men. In the narratives of Sooreh, Soolmaz, and other participants in my study, the masculinity of male factory and construction workers was also constructed as a central challenge to women engineers. Under the unstable economic conditions of the country, especially during fieldwork, and owing to four decades of political and cultural work to enforce segregation, these women were dealing with the threatened masculinities of workers (and men in positions of power), who found recourse in devaluing them as educationally and professionally privileged groups of women.

Not surprisingly, these day-to-day navigations of men's problematic and toxic practices of masculinity translated into excessive emotional and mental pressure that disrupted the women's lives and livelihoods. Raha, the head of the engineering department of a large company in Isfahan, mentioned:

I am not a person who easily cries, but there have been times that I sat in my car and cried out loudly because of the pressures. When you are not trusted and accepted in your job, there is a constant pressure on you because you feel that you should not be here. In my case, I often feel that a man with the same credentials would save the company from this hassle of side problems [that come up in daily work for a woman].

The women's narratives in the last two sections shed light on the unbalanced power relations that underlie the ways gender is performed and accomplished. The consequences of the challenges posed by women's entry into and advancement in masculine jobs to men's sense of self and negotiations of a masculine identity go beyond men's identity struggles at an individual level. Rather, they translate into women's feelings of exclusion and marginalization, as the quotes above suggested. The women's experiences discussed in this part reveal how men's engagement in problematic practices of masculinity serve as a mechanism for inequality and discrimination in and of itself. In addition to a lack of supporting policies, and the larger discriminative gender discourse put forward by the state in the years after the revolution, the women's narratives show how masculinity as a social construct operates independently as a system of segregation in the Iranian labor market.

Creative Participation in the Gender System

The last two sections of the findings demonstrated that female on-site engineers experience serious challenges to open their ways and survive in this occupation. However, in the face of working environments in which practices of masculinity were normalized and constructions of work and masculinity were intertwined, many of these women managed to maintain their optimism, do their jobs, and make use of their skills and education.My analysis revealed that this mechanism of resilience involved women's intense identity work and negotiations to define and defend their career choices, capabilities, and identities as female engineers inside and outside their work environments. In the last section, I explore women's strategies and discourse of resistance and resilience.

I use the term "creative participations in the gender system" to describe how these women borrowed from the same cultural beliefs and values that buttress the boundaries and hierarchies of masculinity and femininity (i.e., the gender system) to turn the discriminative implications of institutionalized masculinity on its head and navigate their ways into on-site engineering. Creative participation in the gender system was pursued through investments in and enactments of culturally established gendered values—such as a belief in women's inherent ability to be more patient, humble, and modest than men—in ways that helped the women reverse the resentments and adversities they faced.

As I will discuss in this section, beyond the level of knowledge and skills, success in these women's narratives was constructed as their ability to deal with men. Their discourse and strategies in doing so, however, were not fed by intentions to "undo" the gender system through behaviors and practices that unsettle conventional beliefs about masculinity and femininity. Instead, these women found empowerment in their ability to strategically deal with men's "doings" of masculinity in ways that enabled them to reduce the challenges discussed above.

I call these beliefs, behaviors, and practices among women "participation in the gender system" because they may not shift the broader conventional gender norms in their workplaces and beyond. Rather than transforming masculinity as a social construct, women's day-to-day strategies of empowerment were shaped around handling the consequences of masculine practices in their work.

However, I call them "creative," as they do not entail women's passive compliance with the gender hierarchy; they rather involve women's careful and strategic work to employ the gender system in a way that serves their goals.

For many of my participants, for example, the strategic use of silence (Gatwiri & Mumbi, 2016) was more efficient than the strategic use of voice in establishing their positions and protecting their status. Working in male-dominated professions had taught them that being outspoken does not always serve their best interests.Safoora, a woman in her 40s and a civil engineer and CEO of a construction company, said that women who enter the world of business must be very cautious about what they say and must avoid having too much visibility:

Just like a brain that is covered by a skull and skin, women sometimes must veil their ideas to avoid being burdened.

Safoora was a well-known and established engineer in her professional community; she was introduced to me by several male members of the city construction engineering institute in Isfahan. Despite her high-level position, she believed that it is women's ability to strategically and subtly apply silence when necessary—rather than overtly expressing their ideas to gain attention—that eventually secures their positions in male-dominated professions. Similarly, Salma, an electrical engineer in her 20s, who had a supervisory-level job in an LED lamp factory in Isfahan, observed:

When working with men, silence works better in most cases, even if you believe what they say is wrong [...] or they think you don't have anything to say!

Salma saw herself as a successful electrical engineer compared to many of her female fellows. She argued that, while many female engineers become frustrated in male-dominated environments and leave their jobs, she had been able to employ strategic silence to create an empowering space for herself:

I do not argue with men because they usually want to impose their attitudes on you [...] It is better to say 'Okay' and move on. You will prove that you were right with your actions, and they will see it!

While strategic use of silence can be employed as a self-help strategy in any context and by anyone, in these women's narratives, the empowering element of silence was strongly gendered, as it was constructed as a way to deal with what these women viewed as inherent features of masculinity. In other words, women's "accountability to the gender institution" (Martin, 2003) in relation to their interpretations of the social and cultural contexts in which they experienced and navigated masculinity constituted the core of their strategies and discourse of resilience.Neda discussed how a change in her strategy as the supervisor of a group of men granted her success in one of her projects:

It was tough. At some point, I figured I could not order men directly and had to change my tone. For example, instead of telling them to do something, I would say, "Don't you think it would be better to do it this way?" Or, "What do you think we should do?" I learned that arguing with men does not work! They resist your authority as a woman. At the end of the day, they have those patriarchal perceptions toward women in the back of their minds.

Even in dealing with incidences of verbal harassment and abusive behaviors, women found such careful accountabilities to be more empowering and fruitful than direct backlash. We must bear in mind that almost all of these women were working in organizations with no recognition of or protection against sexual misconduct, at least at the time of the fieldwork. In almost all workplaces, women who were victims of sexual misconduct would carry the blame for such incidents, with their manners and ethics being questioned. In this context, women like Nafiseh, from Isfahan, preferred to feign ignorance and let abusive behavior or language go:

> I used to get very upset or act back aggressively. But I noticed I will lose my chances this way! Now I have learned to control my nerve and just guide the topic back to business smoothly […] It has its own politics; you need to somehow make them understand that you are not open to these relations without offending them; many women get angry and so lose their jobs.

Similarly, Soomlaz added:

> You need to keep calm and ignore even if people make fun of you, talk behind your back, or make rumors about you. The best way is to ignore it and mind your own business. Those women who get angry and try to fight back won't survive, and leave these jobs eventually. My dad always says that in a battle, the loser is the one who loses her nerve.

Women's investments in and employment of their gender knowledge extend beyond the workplace context and enable them to negotiate with the patriarchal structures of the family as they relate to their career opportunities.Some women described being strategic in the amount of information they released to their families regarding their working environments. Andisheh, a chemical engineer in Isfahan, revealed:

> I never talked much about my working conditions at home; maybe I even pretended to be in better conditions than what I had. The second day of work in my first job, my dad came to the factory to see where his girl worked. He was shocked! I clearly remember his face when he asked, "Do you really want to work here?!" I did not show him my actual office, which was inside the manufacturing salon. I took him to the administration building in one of the accounting offices where a female accountant was working. I told him that I am here from morning to evening, sitting next to this lady. I did not want my dad to panic from knowing that I am the only woman inside the manufacturing salon. I think the reason was that I did not want him to feel dishonored and say, "I do not want you to work!"

Although some scholars have argued that such individual strategies of empowerment lack the potential to make lasting changes for the collective empowerment of women (Bespinar, 2010), they are important for understanding alternative forms of empowerment that women have developed while living under patriarchal states. In his book, *Life as Politics*, Bayat (2009) elucidated how "quiet and unassuming daily struggles" in the "very zones of exclusion" in the public domain create conditions for social transformations. Regarding women in post-revolutionary Iran, he observed that through "fragmented actions," women "push for their claims, not as deliberate acts of defiance, but as logical and natural venues to express individuality and better their life chances." These seemingly fragmented practices, in Bayat's view, deliver unavoidable changes for the collective good. Bayat's framework urges us to go beyond conventional accounts of change, resistance, and empowerment—which envision change only through institutional adjustments pressed by collective and coherent movements with strong leadership, strategic mobilization, and clear framing—particularly regarding women in the Middle East. In the absence of a material and discursive context for such mechanisms of transformations to emerge and flourish under patriarchal regimes, it is crucial, both analytically and politically, to pay attention to the nuances of how women empower themselves in the face of intense discrimination, as I aimed to do in this section. In the next section, I further discuss the findings and conclusions.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study explored the work narratives of female on-site engineers in the Islamic Republic of Iran to deepen the understanding of how they experience, navigate, and negotiate with the masculine constructions of their work environments. My analysis of the women's narratives revealed that men's engagement in problematic masculinity practices is integral to women's understandings and definitions of their careers. The women discussed their observations and experiences of men's "doings" of masculinity in their work environments as being shaped around the sexualization of women's professional lives and their marginalization in the work processes and culture. The women's narratives showed how the precariousness and vulnerability of masculinity makes women's careers an easy venue for men's day-to-day expressions, achievements, and affirmations of masculinity owing to the extremely gender-imbalanced playing field in the context of the Iranian labor market. The women's discourse and strategies for dealing with those unfriendly conditions, however, were not fed by intentions to "undo" the gender system through behaviors and practices that unsettle conventional beliefs about masculinity and femininity. Instead, as my analysis showed, these women found empowerment in their ability to strategically bargain with men's "doings" of masculinity in ways that enabled them to reduce the challenges discussed in the paper. I called the women's strategies of resilience and empowerment "creative participation in the gender system", since, while not transforming masculinity as a social construct, they involved women's careful and strategic work to employ the gender system in a way that serves their goals and interests.

Despite the valuable insights that previous studies provided about the embeddedness of masculinity in the construction of work, there are two gaps that this study contributes to filling: first, while masculinity in the context of work has been explored based on the experiences and perspectives of men, less attention has been paid to women's navigations of and negotiations with day-to-day manifestations of masculinity in their work spheres. Second, and more importantly, with a few exceptions (Natarjan, 2006; Prenzler & Sinclair, 2013), most of the research in this area has been based in developed countries, especially in the West. With the pressure coming from tenets of postcolonial feminism to recognize the contextual specificities of women's experiences (Patil, 2013; Collins, 2000; Mohanty, 1988), it is problematic that the voices and experiences of Middle Eastern women are overshadowed within the English-language academic literature.

Through the narratives of 30 Iranian women who work in the margins of the margins of a male-dominated labor market—female on-site engineers—this study showed how the nuances of women's day-to-day work challenges go beyond structural discrimination and patriarchy embedded at different institutional levels in the country.

In 1990, Joan Acker recommended a theoretical shift from patriarchy to gender in sociological attempts to understand inequalities against women (Bridges & Messerscmit, 2017). The problem with patriarchy, in her discussion, was its failure to capture the contextual and fluid nature of issues women face. Patriarchy, in accounts prior to the development of more nuanced gender theories, was considered a homogenous and solid structure that explains all forms of oppression against women in all contexts (Acker, 1989). Acker suggested making a shift "from asking about how the subordination of women is produced, maintained, and changed to questions about how gender is involved in processes and structures that previously have been conceived as having nothing to do with gender."

While this theoretical shift is now well established in the Western literature on gender discrimination, in the context of the Middle East, the concept of patriarchy is still at the center of academic and journalistic accounts of women's oppression (Soltani, 2017; Goetz, 1997; Kandiyoti, 1988), and there is a shortage of empirical evidence and theoretical analyses to help make this shift from patriarchy to gender. In this sense, the theoretical lens that I used in this study makes a unique contribution to current debates on women's status in the male-dominated labor markets of the Middle Eastern countries by shifting the center of analysis from patriarchal structures (especially the state's patriarchy) to the on-the-ground nuances of how the gender system operates independently to shape women's struggles and strategies of resilience. My findings suggested that, beyond the patriarchal structures, women were concerned with problematic cultural beliefs and values that fed an unequal and discriminatory gender system; a system which, in their views, justified, promoted, and normalized masculinity practices in their work environments and rendered their workplaces as venues for performances and achievements of masculinity.

In addition, any account of patriarchy that overlooks women's active negotiations with patriarchy's contours of oppression is reductionist. As Feldman (2001) suggested, patriarchal relations must be understood as "mediated processes of negotiation constituted by complex identities and practices rather than by an assumed universalized, unitary, dominating force of male power and authority and female subordination." Restructuring of patriarchal relations does not necessarily happen through adjustments from above, such as developmental, economic, political, and cultural interventions. Patriarchal relations are restructured through the day-to-day practices of women in dealing with incidences of inequalities and oppression (Kandiyoti, 1988; Gatwiri & Mumbi, 2016). As I discussed in the last section of the findings, while not transforming the larger cultural processes and structures that define hierarchies of masculinity and femininity, the women managed to creatively carve out empowering spaces for themselves and overcome many struggles.

As Patricia Collins (2000) rigorously and powerfully argued, oppression is complex and multifaceted. She also taught us that acceptance of the complex nature of oppression must come by developing "a complex notion of empowerment." Incidences and acts of oppression are embedded in our daily lives in all their mundaneness as much as they can be found in macro-level structures and institutions. In the same way, activism for empowerment among women covers a range of activities from individual navigation of day-to-day inequalities to collective movements. She warns us against "labeling one form of oppression as more important than others, or one expression of activism as more radical than another" (Collins, 2000, p. 288).

These complexities cannot be captured and appreciated if we do not expand our definitions of what count as acts of empowerment, as Collins and many other feminists have encouraged us to do (Mohanty, 1988; Mahmood, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 2002).

Using the narratives and experiences of my participants, I showed how, despite what one may expect based on the liberal definition of empowerment, the women's discourse and strategies of empowerment were not necessarily contrary to the conventional gender norms and beliefs that feed the hierarchical gender system. In many senses, interestingly, what fed these women's strategies of resilience intersected with essentialist approaches to womanhood. This is not to grant any legitimacy to the deeply rooted discrimination that is institutionalized at different levels in post-revolutionary Iran. My goal was to recommend a framework for thinking about women living under patriarchal states, particularly in the Middle East and Iran, that goes beyond the reductionist "women versus the state" model and recognizes the complexities of the state's approach to womanhood, as well as women's responses to its structural oppression.

This approach to oppression and empowerment provides us with a theoretical basis and an analytical lens through which to recognize all manifestations of women's agency and empowerment in their great diversity. Additionally, it enables more humility to be directed toward those women, who courageously and creatively find ways around structural inequalities, but who do not necessarily engage with the collective form of anti-patriarchy movements and practices that we, as feminist scholars who are passionate about equality, would like to witness. These approaches help us to understand how agency exists "within structural and cultural limitations and not outside them" (Burke, 2012) and to note how empowerment is at work underneath structural injustices that we aspire to resolve. In this sense, this paper also contributes to post-colonial feminist scholarship.

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