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Ambiguous Subjectivity within the Algerian Patriarchal Household: A Case Study of Married Working Women in Mascara

ذاتية غامضة داخل الاسرة الجزائرية المحكومة بالسلطة الأبوية:
دراسة حالة النساء العاملات المتزوجات في ولاية معسكر

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Abstract:

The Algerian family has undergone significant transformations within the last twenty years. It has, for a long time, been of a patriarchal character where the father had a preponderant position. Nowadays, the family structure and the power relations have drastically been altered with women's acquisition of a status relatively independent from the male relative's by accessing the paid labor force, thereby earning social visibility. This new situation has tumbled the established and deeply rooted cultural norms within the Algerian society. This paradoxical situation has entailed an ambiguous subjectivity which positions women in a determining turning point, on the one hand, as agents who reproduce patriarchal social arrangements, and as attempting to break away from them by creating an autonomous individual capable of performative actions on the other.

In this regard, the present paper attempts to bring into view the microlevel indicator of the macrolevel transformation of the Algerian female agent amidst the socioeconomic waves of modernization and the dragging forces of patriarchy. It attempts to analyze working women's perceptions of their own situation and the power dynamics that occur among married couples.

Keywords: subjectivity, socioeconomic status, the family structure.

الملخص:

شهدت الأسرة الجزائرية تحولات كبيرة خلال العشرين سنة الماضية. لقد كانت، لفترة طويلة، ذات طابع أبوي حيث كان للأب السلطة الأولى. في الوقت الحاضر، تم تغيير هيكل الأسرة وعلاقات القوة بشكل كبير مع اكتساب المرأة لوضع مستقل نسبياً عن اقربائها الذكور من خلال دخولها عالم الشغل، وبالتالي كسب مكانة اجتماعية. ولكن سرعان ما اصدم هذا الوضع الجديد بالمعايير الثقافية الراسخة والمتأصلة في المجتمع الجزائري. حيث ادى ذلك الوضع المتناقض الى ذاتية غامضة تضع امام مفترق طرق من ناحية كعملاء يعيدون إنتاج الترتيبات الاجتماعية الأبوية، ومحاولة الانفصال عنهم من خلال إنشاء فرد مستقل قادر على اتخاذ إجراءات مبتكرة من جهة أخرى.

في هذا الصدد، تحاول من خلال هذا العمل أن ندرس مؤشرات المستوى الجزئي لهذا التحول التي تمثل المستوى الكلي المؤثر على المرأة لعاملة الجزائرية وسط موجات التحديث الاجتماعي والاقتصادي وقوى الأبوية. كما نحاول تحليل تصورات النساء العاملات عن وضعهن وديناميات السلطة التي تحدث بين الأزواج.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الذاتية، الحالة الاجتماعية والاقتصادية، الأسرة.

1. INTRODUCTION

The persistence of patriarchy in the Algerian society has utilized reproduction as an instrument for insuring its survival in the private sphere while the public sphere has attempted to shape the female into an appropriate subject for the labor market through homologization.

In this work, we will attempt to discern the interplay of some constituents of patriarchy determining the subject position of the woman in the Algerian household.

The purpose of this investigation is to focus on the private side of women's lives. To do so, we advanced the following hypothesis: women's subject position is affected by the process of reproducing patriarchy, thus inducing an unstable status and hindering the maturation of women's status inside the family.

2. Production and Reproduction

2.1 The Patriarchal Gender Contract

Within each society, the underlying structures create categories for each individual to fit in and contribute later to their reproduction. It is a perpetual mechanism that preserves the character of each social group and ensures its survival. This very process indoctrinates people to emulate the same predestined pattern according to their social category. Gender, for instance, is a system that makes use of sexual attributes to be interpreted into cultural traits that produce what we know as men and women. At this stage, socialization of individuals through the

distribution of gender roles begins to operate. Patriarchy is the determining factor that orchestrates the whole process (Millet, 1968, Walby, 1989, Pateman, 1988, Alsop et al., 2002). It introduces a pattern considered to be crucial for its survival, labeled *reproduction*, of which the major part is attributed to the woman¹, since the hierarchical structuring of the position of males and females starts from the household, the field where women are more influential.

Edholm et al. (1977) and Yeoh et al. (2015: 30) distinguish three types of reproduction: reproduction of social roles, human or biological reproduction and reproduction of the labor force. Reproduction of social roles ensures the survival of a society, it creates -and recreates- the fundamental pillars that mark its distinguishing features. For instance, women give birth to children who will later be the workforce that capitalism needs. It constitutes a supply chain in which each individual is expected to fulfill a specifically assigned task according to the needs of the mode of production (ibid).

The aforementioned types of reproduction are determined by biological reproduction that entails assigning care responsibilities to women due to the sexual division of labor (Beneria, 1979). It is often accounted for as natural and unbiased or, in the best cases, as affected by political and/or economic factors. It is, in fact, primarily determined by the patriarchal relation of men to women, and further enforced by other ideologies. So, for example, *the survival of the family in capitalism is not a relic from a former mode of production but the way human reproduction is controlled under capitalism* (Mackintosh; in Meulenbelt, 1984 :55).

Hence, reproduction is instrumental in the formation and persistence of the patriarchal system², as it functions as a factor for the alliance of both patriarchy and capitalism. The existence of the sphere of production is undoubtedly premised by that of reproduction. In the present paper, the reproduction of social roles is particularly accentuated.

The reproduction of social roles is determined by the sociohistorical conditions of each society. In Algeria, gender roles used to be, and still¹ are, defined by patriarchy which has taken many different shapes throughout the history of the country. The tribal structure, highly reliant on kin ties, sets strict rules functioning in favor of its survival demanding the individual's loyalty and submissiveness, granting them affiliation and the *tribes collective responsibility for the individual's actions* (Sharabi, 1988:29).

In the Feminist Marxist tradition, social relations are considered as productive forces of gendered beings, therefore they are not static and '*inherently conflictive and subject to developmental change*' (Peet and Hartwick:148) Moreover, as events are more globalized and trespass borders, many believe that social processes shaping their lives are largely influenced by forces external to their territorial states, making the issue of social justice not only a matter of internal consideration but of external forces as well (Fraser, 2013:192).

What constitutes a crucial part of the construction of the female subject is, a) making 'reproduction' a constituent of femininity, giving birth and doing care work, and b) passing patriarchal beliefs and practices through generations and by access to the public arena, replicating what men have already

created and overpassed such as occupying professional positions historically dominated by men.

2.2 The Homologization of the Female Subject:

If approached from an economic standpoint, the thriving global market has commodified each aspect of our lives. Even the most domestically produced goods are now industrially manufactured. The traditional producers of this kind of labor-women- are now incorporated as part of the equation, being introduced into the so-called male realms, gradually climbing the social ladder and occupying highly ranked job positions. However, their presence in the public sphere has sharpened their objectification (Tripp, 2006:168).

So, the creation of society has already been made on the basis of a difference that celebrates the male subject and that implies female deficiency. The job market, as it is currently known, is designed by men to fit men's needs. This may explain the great obstacles that hinder women's career achievement and life stability, such as the sacrifices they have to make on behalf of their family life to get hired and ensure an upward mobility in their jobs.

According to Cavarero (1992) and Bock and James (1992: 35), female sexual difference has been treated on two levels, *exclusion* and *homologization* which have both acted as systems of repression, each in a different guise. The level of exclusion denies women the rights that elevate them to rationality, i.e. political rights of citizenship and participation in

the public sphere. The *homologization* level departs from the postulate that men and women can be viewed and treated as sexless human beings, thus applying supposedly neutral and universal rules on both. This model simply stands as a straw man, for the so-called universal sexless subject does not exist except through the lens of its conceiver, 'man', that would, by virtue of his self-proclaimed power, instill a paradigm adapted to his own worldview which ends up suppressing sexual differences and precluding the very essence of the struggle for women's rights.

The homologization model applies to the present situation of women in the Algerian context, since they entered a field primarily designed by males for males, which has created antagonisms in the male/female relation.

Women have been assigned the role of reproducers of the cultural traits that fall within the boundaries of the nation's collectivity which defines gender relations and identities. Paradoxically, they have been agents of their own oppression for centuries, reinforcing patriarchal domination in society until they began to reverse the mechanism in their own interest. This transitional phase has actually been undergirded by the reformist waves that the country has witnessed (anti-colonial, nationalist, secular and even religious discourses).

The mutation that the Algerian family structure has undergone is not easily discernible, since the traditional family was based on a patriarchal system characterized by unity, prioritizing the collective over the individual, and the male over the female. It endowed the father absolute rule over the family members who constitute an extended model made of many

generations living under the same roof. Marriage was endogamous and lineage was patrilineal, descending from father to son. In recent years, this strong structure seems to have cracked and fragmented into a new pattern of family structure wherein authority is distributed among other members as a result of openness to a modernized lifestyle, education of females, industrialization, etc., where domestic production has gradually been absorbed by the state and regularized into formal economic sectors. (Graine, 2006:122).

This infiltration favors a systematic control over women's life patterns and sharpens the division between public and private. Important decisions have been taken with regard to the educated salaried wife and intra-familial dialogue is much more fluid and open³.

In the case of urban families, a dual earner family model is rising since women have gained a considerable status by accessing the workforce. By engaging in the marriage contract, they contribute a great deal to the economic welfare of the household, a role that was once attributed to the husband as the sole breadwinner. In a 2013 statistical study conducted by the National Office of Statistics (ONS), the active female population was estimated at 19% of the whole active population in the labor market, which is considerably low but still marks a gradual increase compared to the 12% in 2000 (http://www.ons.dz/IMG/pdf/Donnees_Stat_Emploi_2013.pdf).

This relative increase reflects the growing access of girls to higher education which increases considerably their chances to get better job opportunities. In addition to that, the need to boost the economy through more workforce participation has

contributed significantly to more female visibility in the workplace.

3. Method and Materials:

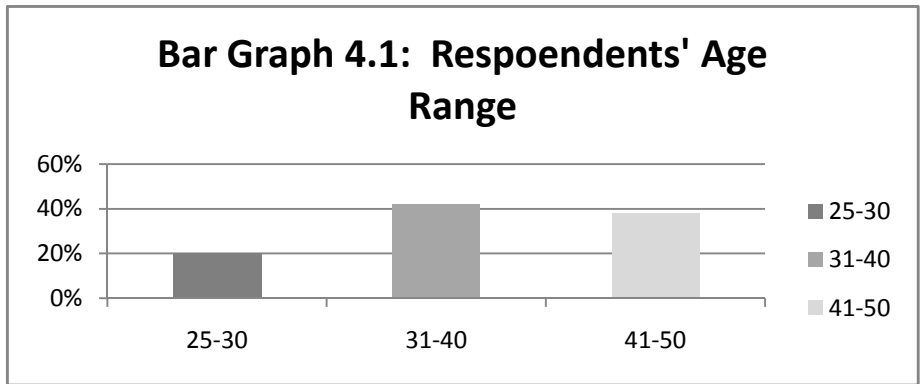
To test the hypothesis advanced in this paper, we used a survey research. We organized a group administered questionnaire gathering a total number of $n= 30$ married female teachers in the education sector in Algeria.

In operationalizing the theoretical construct ‘reproduction of patriarchy’ as an independent variable, we developed four indicators to measure it (husband’s authority, mobility, financial resources and care activities) and four other indicators to refer to the subject position of women in the household as a dependent variable (independence from the male relative, income contribution, marital quality, career advancement). We organized a group administered questionnaire that contains eight questions with a five item Likert scale (appendix 1). To estimate the central tendency of each variable we calculated the mean of each question, then the mean of the whole variable. To examine the relation between the dependent and independent variables, we calculated the correlation between them.

4. Results:

The demographic profile of the respondents illustrates three age categories with 20% for 25-30 range, 42% for 31-40 and 38% for 41-50 respectively, with the highest rank recorded

for the 31-40 category.



Source: M.SExcel.

Tables (4.2) and (4.3) below represent the descriptive analysis of the research variables. Attributes representing the patriarchy variable have a general mean of 3.8 which is superior to the hypothetical mean 3. Authority of the husband in family decisions equaled 4.06, restrictions on wife's mobility was estimated at 3.53, husband's control over financial resources equaled 3.43 and the burden of care responsibilities was indicated by 4.16.

Table 4.2: Respondents' Perceptions of the Reproduction of Patriarchy

	The reproduction of patriarchy	Mean
1	The husband has more power over family decisions than his wife.	4.06
2	Mobility can be restricted by the husband.	3.53
3	Financial resources are managed by the husband.	3.43
4	Household care activities are performed by the wife and in a similar amount as a non-working wife.	4.16
	Mean of the reproduction of patriarchy variable	3.8

Source: M.S Excel

Likewise, regarding the subjectivity variable, it scored a mean of 3.36, also higher than the hypothetical one. The mean of the attribute independence through paid work was 3.5, household income contribution was 3.06. A woman's work outside home affecting negatively marital relationships equaled 3.53 and care responsibilities as hindering women's career advancement was estimated at 3.36.

Table 4.3: Respondents' Perceptions of the Reproduction of Patriarchy

	The construction of female subjectivity	Mean
1	A working woman has not acquired full independence through work outside the home.	3.5
2	A working woman is obliged to contribute to household expenditures.	3.06
3	Work outside the home may have negative effects on the relationship between husband and wife.	3.53
4	Care responsibilities hinder a woman's career advancement.	3.36
	Mean of the construction of female subjectivity variable	3.36

Source: M.S Excel

Correlation between the dependent and independent variables,

as shown in Table (4.4) is estimated at $r = .25$, which is closer to the value +1 in the range (-1 to +1).

Table 4.4: Correlation of the Dependent and Independent Variables

Variables	Correlation coefficient
Reproduction of patriarchy	.25
Construction of female subjectivity	

Source: M.S Excel

5. Discussion

The majority of the respondents are between 31-40 with a percentage of 42%, which is slightly higher than the group between 41-50. This reflects the reality of women in Algeria whose access to higher education and the job market caused delayed marriage. In this study, the majority got married after the age of 30.

As regards the analysis of the questions, the mean of all questions related to the first variable (table 4.2) reached a higher value than the hypothetical one. These findings reveal a general agreement among the subjects that patriarchy is still pervasive in the Algerian society. Its reproduction is guaranteed by a

maldistribution of authority in the household among males and females (family decisions and financial resources are controlled by the husband whereas less valued activities, such as care activities, are relegated to the female).

As to the second variable, most of the responses demonstrate that the respondents have difficulty in designing their own path as subjects and perceive paid work as insufficient to guarantee them a better status. They agree that there exists a clash between their situation as working women and their expected subordinate role in the private sphere. Specifically, their role as care givers is still perceived as women's responsibility and the modest participation of their male counterparts aggravates the situation and hinders their career advancement. To determine the existence of a relationship between the variables, we calculated the correlation which was estimated at $r = .25$, indicating a positive relation. This is best illustrated through the elements of patriarchy that determine the factors affecting the nature of the female relation to the social environment and thereby the construction of her subjectivity.

As reported by the respondents, they do not have complete control over their financial resources given that, in several cases, they have to contribute to household expenditures, and their status as working women may perturb power asymmetries and be a cause of conflict.

6. Conclusions

In the present research work, we attempted to fathom the

factors determining working women's position within the family in Algeria.

The findings reveal that despite the fact that women have gained more rights and improved their socioeconomic status in the public sphere, they are still trapped in the patriarchal net in the private one, and more importantly, they unconsciously contribute to its reproduction.

The very means of disposing them of the shackles of patriarchy is used to control them, thus bringing them back to its confines.

The power game, in which both males and females are involved, allows patriarchy to be reproduced through what might be perceived as minor acts which, in turn, have their origin in the very system that defines appropriate gender roles and relations.

Although female subjects, in the present study, opted for a position in the public sphere, they remain under the rule of the system in which they are active agents of its recreation and survival.

In this study, the variables used to measure patriarchy are by no means all-encompassing. Additional variables could be added to reach other aspects and bring other pieces of the puzzle back under the spotlight. Moreover, other dimensions of social reality, such as religion and economy, that still affect gender dynamics will have to be taken account of as more explanatory factors.

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