

Gender transformations in Algerian culture: A socio-anthropological analysis of social discourse on masculinity and femininity between a changing social reality and a persistent symbolic heritage

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Abstract---In recent decades, Algerian society has undergone tangible social transformations driven by globalization and technological advancement, suggesting a shift in mentalities and a relative openness toward the idea of gender equality. Women's access to education and their participation in the public sphere alongside men have emerged as indicators of a reconfiguration of traditional gender roles. However, these transformations do not necessarily imply a rupture with the deep-rooted symbolic structures that perpetuate gender differentiation. Through a socio-anthropological analysis of everyday social discourse, it becomes evident that representations of masculinity and femininity remain governed by patriarchal logic, wherein women are confined and reduced to their bodies and emotions, while men are granted intellectual authority. This perception—and the tension between apparent change and the persistence of symbolic structures—continues to reproduce a cultural system that compels individuals to conform to rigid gender norms. Any transgression of these norms is perceived as a breach of social boundaries, leading to forms of symbolic exclusion. On this basis, the article poses a central question: What image of women and men is constructed in Algerian culture, between a changing social reality and a cultural heritage that constrains the evolution of mentalities, from a critical gender perspective?

Keywords---Masculinity and femininity values, Algerian culture, Algerian mentality, socialization, social discourse, social imaginary, new social reality, gender transformations, cultural heritage.

How to Cite:

Samia, B., & Madani, S.-Z. (2025). Gender transformations in Algerian culture: A socio-anthropological analysis of social discourse on masculinity and femininity between a changing social reality and a persistent symbolic heritage. *The International Tax Journal*, 52(6), 3893–3906. Retrieved from <https://internationaltaxjournal.online/index.php/itj/article/view/381>

The International tax journal ISSN: 0097-7314 E-ISSN: 3066-2370 © 2025

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Submitted: 05 March 2025 | Revised: 20 May 2025 | Accepted: 19 July 2025

Introduction

Gender representations constitute a fundamental part of the symbolic structure that shapes social relations and determines patterns of behavior and attitudes within societies. In the Algerian context, these representations are manifested in social discourse, particularly through sayings and popular proverbs, which reproduce stereotypical images of women and men, reinforce cultural values that elevate masculinity, and reposition femininity in a place of subordination and weakness. When individuals transgress these values—especially when their behavior does not align with their socially presumed gender—such acts are perceived as violations of social norms and as threats to the stability of the symbolic order. Consequently, they are subjected to various forms of exclusion and symbolic punishment, exercised through language, mockery, and popular classification.

Amid the rapid social transformations experienced by Algerian society, driven by globalization and technological and communicational developments, a clear tension emerges between the changing social reality and the persistence of traditional gender representations. This raises a central question regarding the extent to which social discourse is capable of keeping pace with these transformations, and how the images of women and men are constructed as opposing symbols of strength and weakness. It also interrogates the role of socialization in reinforcing gender boundaries. Furthermore, this article questions whether gender values are considered an extension of nature and the sacred, thereby legitimizing the symbolic pressures exerted on individuals when they transgress these boundaries.

1. Gendered Socialization and Representations of the Other Gender in Social Discourse:

Social roles are distributed among individuals according to their biological sex, with each society possessing its own specific model of masculinity and femininity. These models become deeply rooted in the collective consciousness and are reproduced through the process of socialization. The differences in values and norms associated with masculinity and femininity generate two distinct types of social individuals, forming what resembles a “symbolic factory” that produces men and women according to culturally defined patterns.

As Durkheim noted, socialization means “transforming the individual from a non-social being into a social being, through the inculcation of patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior. Among the fundamental functions of socialization is the stabilization of acquired inclinations and behaviors. The internalization of social values and norms aims to render social rules—external to the individual by nature—‘present’ within them, while reinforcing solidarity among members of the group. As a mechanism for organizing social life, socialization reduces the need for social sanctions” (Boudon et al., citing Durkheim, 2012, p. 217).

Socialization thus determines the way individuals behave according to their gender. It is “the process through which individuals—by learning the dominant patterns of behavior and thought in their environment, and by internalizing these patterns and integrating them into their personality—become members of groups or communities within which they acquire a defined status” (Ferriol, 2011, p. 157). It is also “a complex process of interaction through which the individual learns the habits, skills, beliefs, and levels of judgment necessary for effective participation in local communities” (Ghaith, 1985, p. 25). As Zine El Abidine Darwish argues, this process “means imparting to the individual the fundamental characteristics of the society in which they live, represented in the values, orientations, prevailing customs, and the socially desired norms and behaviors of that society. It is a continuous process across an unbroken span of time, beginning from the very first moments of an individual’s life until their death” (Darwish, 1999, p. 68).

Through socialization, therefore, social boundaries and norms are drawn differently according to gender. Socialization is directed toward boys and girls in line with the values and standards each is

expected to adopt. The destiny of the individual is socially determined through primary and secondary institutions of socialization—beginning with the family, continuing through the school, places of worship, and the media, and extending into the “public sphere.”

Individuals are not born as men or women; they become so through learning the social roles associated with their gender. As the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir famously stated: *“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”* (De Beauvoir, 1949, p. 13). The same applies to men. This perspective resonates with the thought of Margaret Mead, who observed: *“The girl learns to sit with her legs closed, to preserve her virginity, to be ashamed of her body, and then to await her passive role in life as a woman. The boy, by contrast, moves his legs freely, takes pride in his body, and enters the world of men with positivity. If the girl were to receive the same upbringing as the boy, there would be no such differences between man and woman, or between masculinity and femininity”* (El Saadawi, quoting Mead, 1990, p. 46).

Sex (male/female) is a biological characteristic, whereas gender (man/woman) is a socially acquired construct that changes according to contexts and circumstances. Gender and sex are often conflated and perceived as identical, which reinforces stereotypical conceptions that promote the idea that masculinity and femininity are not merely social or cultural constructions. These social conceptions assume that masculinity necessarily signifies strength, control, rationality, boldness, and perhaps a tendency toward domination, while femininity signifies gentleness, emotion, obedience, and care—qualities presumed to be “instinctive” in women. In this way, the individual is confined to characteristics assumed to be biological or innate, and social roles are viewed as a natural extension of these traits.

From this perspective, the idea of gender equality and parity between the sexes is excluded from collective mentalities, particularly in conservative societies such as Algeria, where socialization differs between males and females and produces two distinct types of individuals: the active, autonomous individual associated with reason, and the passive, directed individual associated with the body. The male body is considered private property, while the female body is perceived as collective property, subject to surveillance and regulation.

This is evident in the fact that Algerian society forgives men for many transgressions but forgives women for almost none. Women are raised in fear, trained in prohibitions and permissions, and burdened with the responsibility of preserving “honor” as the family’s public face (the family’s shop window). Any deviation from obedience and norms is considered a “shame,” as Lahouari Addi expressed: *“There are social values that women have no choice but to accept”* (Addi, 1994, p.105). Men, by contrast, are socialized as individuals who do not accept submission, to the point of producing rebellious subjects. Their transgression of social rules is interpreted as something inherent to their masculine nature, reflected in the popular proverb: *“A woman’s ‘no’ is a child’s word, a man’s ‘no’ is a man’s word.”*

In this way, inequalities and differences in power and status between the sexes are justified, and the values instilled in each gender appear as mechanisms of symbolic regulation.

On this basis, the socio-anthropological analysis raises the following problem: What do the values and norms associated with masculinity and femininity in Algerian society reveal through the processes of socialization and social discourse? And how do these values contribute to constructing boundaries between the sexes through a differential socialization that reproduces gender differences between men and women?

1.1 Gendered Values Instilled Through the Process of Socialization as a Differential Technique:

Socialization constitutes one of the fundamental mechanisms for reproducing the symbolic order based on gender differentiation. It transforms gender into a hierarchical system that perpetuates itself across generations. From childhood, individuals are inculcated with a set of values and behaviors that

determine their position within the social structure and reinforce stereotypical conceptions of the self and of the other gender, thereby producing an ideal model of manhood and an ideal model of womanhood. In this context, gender identity is not constructed as a biological given but is shaped through an educational and cultural process that legitimizes differences and naturalizes them. This differential process provides an important entry point for understanding how Algerian society produces its representations of masculinity and femininity, and how it redistributes roles, spaces, and power among individuals through mechanisms of regulation embodied in the values instilled in each gender.

a. Values of Femininity as a Standard of Female Identity:

-Submission: Woman is portrayed as naturally submissive, expected to obey those who monitor her—most often men (father, brother, husband). This discourse reproduces dependency as a “natural” feminine trait, legitimizing male surveillance as a rightful authority under the guise of protection and discipline.

-Fear: Woman is depicted as inherently fragile, framed within a discourse that constructs her as fearful and threatened, raised to be cautious of losing “honor,” reduced to the hymen. This reproduces symbolic control over the female body, conceived as a “site of danger,” under a moral framework that criminalizes deviation from the feminine role.

-Obedience and Patience: The image of woman is reformulated within a social discourse that promotes acceptance and silence as “natural” feminine traits. Women are taught that obedience is a virtue, while dissent is considered rebellion that undermines family and society. In this context, patience becomes a tool of social regulation that legitimizes male dominance and criminalizes resistance.

-Sacrifice: Within the framework of socialization, women are directed to prioritize collective interests over individual ones. Sacrifice is presented as an essential feminine quality. This conception reinforces the image of woman as a social actor devoted to serving others, reproducing cultural representations that make altruism and self-renunciation integral to female identity, in contrast to the emphasis on male independence and individual privilege.

-Restricted Mobility: Women are subjected to constrained mobility in their daily lives, confined by strict rules that limit their movements and direct them toward the “domestic sphere,” socially perceived as the “world of women.” In contrast, the public sphere is regarded as an exclusively male domain, reinforcing the division between the “safe interior” and the “threatening exterior.”

b. Values of Masculinity as a Standard of Male Identity

-Independence and Non-Submission: Men are socialized to value independence and resistance to submission. They are raised to be decision-makers and rational leaders, in contrast to the image of women who are presented as dependent.

-Fearlessness: Men are instilled with self-confidence, encouraged to confront threats without retreat, particularly those perceived as endangering family honor and virility. This reinforces the image of the dominant, protective actor. Popular heritage supports this view, as expressed in the proverb: “Prison is for men” (al-habs lil-rijal), which associates imprisonment with masculinity and frames it as a form of sacrifice in defense of honor. Thus, readiness to endure punishment or face danger becomes part of the symbolic legitimacy of manhood, reproduced daily through social discourse.

-Rebellion: Male socialization and community discourse reinforce rebellion and dissatisfaction, expressed in phrases such as “Be a man,” “Your word must stand,” or “The man rules.” These expressions connote toughness and are typically directed at men to encourage steadfastness and refusal to back down from positions or decisions—even when arbitrary, irrational, or harmful. This is especially emphasized in relation to women, where men are urged never to show weakness, regardless of the circumstances or costs, as proof of virility.

-Self-Centeredness: Male socialization fosters self-centeredness, teaching men to see themselves as the focal point of service and attention. Their desires are expected to be met without objection or refusal. This conception entrenches unconditional individual privilege, granting men a dominant position within both family and society, and reproducing the image of man as the holder of absolute authority in both private and public spheres—where male desires are treated as commands.

-Free Mobility: Men are directed toward the public sphere, considered the optimal space to test and prove their masculinity. Man is presented as the “guardian of honor,” always positioned as the active agent who bears responsibility for confrontation with others. As the social discourse puts it: “A man faces, he does not hide like a woman.” In this way, the image of man as a figure of authority and dominance in public space is reproduced, reinforcing

2.1 Values of Femininity and Masculinity and Gender Boundaries in Social Discourse:

As in most societies, individuals in Algeria are classified as male or female and assigned social roles according to cultural norms that reinforce the values of masculinity and femininity. In this context, each individual is expected to conform to the role attributed to their biological sex, and any deviation from this expectation is met with social rejection and normative pressures, expressing a symbolic clash with the dominant system. When women engage in behaviors or professions that are socially “gendered”—that is, those historically reserved for men—they are often confronted with mental rejection expressed through derogatory popular labels in everyday social discourse. This rejection does not merely reflect individual resistance but embodies collective opposition to the transformations in social positions and roles imposed by changing realities. In Algerian mentalities, such practices are deemed incompatible with the “nature of femininity,” which justifies the use of labels such as “masculinized” (*moustarjila*), “manly” (*rajlouiya*), or “mustached” (*moustacha*), alluding to a loss of femininity.

Conversely, men who display behaviors classified as feminine are stigmatized with terms such as “effeminate” (*mokhannath*), “mariva” (a colloquial diminutive), or “femmelette” (from the French *femme*, meaning woman). They may also be called “*farsha*” (literally “mattress”), implying submission and loss of control or dominance. In Algerian society, failure to conform to the values of masculinity or femininity according to one’s biological sex and its alignment with social gender is considered a departure from nature and the sacred. Individuals are subjected to continuous social pressures exercised through language, mockery, and popular proverbs, which function as tools of symbolic regulation that legitimize gender differentiation, reproduce gender boundaries, and resist any attempt to transgress them.

Algerian society thus engineers dividing lines between the sexes and resists their transgression through what is expressed in colloquial social discourse, manifesting in popular sayings and proverbs—“cultural and social products organically linked to the very existence of the human community” (Qassem, 2001, p. 38). These are an integral part of the social imaginary and constitute one of the fundamental references in constructing individuals’ social representations of the determinants of femininity and masculinity. Conformity, as defined by society, to the values of masculinity and femininity—seen as determinants of individual behavior and the foundation of social relations—renders individuals, both women and men, “ordinary,” that is, socially acceptable. Each individual is thus required to identify with their biological sex: anyone with a male body must be a “man,” and anyone with a female body must be a “woman,” as society prescribes and defines.

The discourses collected through fieldwork in Algiers, using semi-structured interviews with a “research group” composed of 16 men and 16 women, revealed deeply rooted social representations of the images of women and men. These discourses emerged as a mixture of proverbs, popular sayings, and colloquial expressions, varying between those used when individuals conform—according to their biological sex—to the values of masculinity or femininity, and those used when they fail to conform, as society requires. In cases of conformity, expressions included: “*A woman must hold her tongue*,” “*Prison is for men*,” “*The servant of men is their master*,” “*A man’s flaw is his pocket*,” “*A strong woman endures her husband*,” “*A woman who keeps her home earns her worth*,” etc. In cases of non-conformity, whether by men or women, expressions such as: “*Living like a man*,” “*Manly woman*,” “*Mattress*,” “*Humiliated one*,” “*Social case*,” “*A woman is not good if she opens her eyes*,” “*Behaving like women*,” “*Showing off*,” “*He has no honor*,” etc., were recorded.

Thus, the question that imposes itself is: **How and why do the values of femininity and masculinity produce dividing boundaries between the sexes?**

Deviation from socially assigned roles occurs when individuals fail to conform to the values of masculinity as men or femininity as women, thereby stepping outside the culturally prescribed stereotypes for each gender. In the eyes of society, such deviation is perceived as abandonment of social status and as a transgression against the sacred norm, and is thus classified as “social deviance.” This is due to the changes it entails in the distribution of roles and positions, and the disruption it causes to the social order and the hierarchical structure of individuals. For this reason, it is regarded as a departure from “nature.”

The colloquial social discourse circulating in Algerian society is replete with proverbs and popular sayings, through which individuals express their attitudes and judgments toward the behaviors of men and women, and the extent to which these behaviors conform to prevailing stereotypes. Social discourse, therefore, reflects the mentality of the Algerian individual—whether in acceptance or rejection of the social reality they have helped construct, consciously or unconsciously. It appears that society continues to encourage the upbringing of individuals according to values rooted in the pillars of patriarchy, in order to preserve—even symbolically—the social relations founded on male authority, by sanctifying the rules established by society, reinforcing them, preventing their violation, and resisting any attempt to change them.

Thus, society views individuals who fail to adhere to the socially defined roles associated with prevailing representations of masculinity and femininity as having lost their symbolic value and status as “men” or “women.” A discriminatory gaze is cast upon them, reproducing gender differences among individuals on the basis of sex, as illustrated below:

Society’s view of men who fail to conform to their social role: Men who deviate from their social role are perceived as having relinquished the rank and status granted to them by society, thereby falling to a lower position—even beneath women—because they have abandoned their masculinity by adopting a value associated with femininity, which is considered, in the social imaginary, a negative trait. Consequently, they are addressed with reproach in the form of social sayings and expressions, such as: *“Be a man, don’t act like women” (kon rajel ma dirsh kinssa).*

Society’s view of women who fail to conform to their social role: Women who adopt behaviors classified as masculine are stigmatized as *“rajlouiya”* (manly), accused of attempting to imitate men. This label signifies non-compliance with gender norms that define what a woman is supposed to be, and an attempt to ascend to a “higher social rank” by climbing the social hierarchy and transgressing prohibitions through the adoption of masculine values, which in this context are synonymous with authority and superiority. Such behavior is interpreted as rebellion against the existing social order, as it contravenes what is imposed upon women and represents an attempt to surpass the boundaries of femininity in order to gain male privileges. As a result, women are confronted with derogatory and exclusionary expressions, such as: *“She acts like a man” (shghoul rajel)*, implying non-compliance with the essential role that society deems appropriate for them.

This characterization reveals that, within the patriarchal system prevailing in Algerian society, the values of masculinity are constructed as antithetical to those of femininity: feminine values are consistently classified as negative, while masculine values are considered positive. Yet this classification is reversed when women adopt masculine values, which then themselves become negative; likewise, feminine values become even more stigmatized when adopted by men. Does this representation indicate the strength of patriarchal authority in Algerian society? And are the inequalities between men and women unrelated to biology, but rather cultural constructions that reshape femininity and masculinity and position individuals within a hierarchical social order?

Patriarchy is a fortified social structure, deriving its legitimacy from multiple institutions such as religion, law, and custom. As Mohamed Harbi notes: *“Patriarchy in Algeria is sanctified by religion”* (Harbi, in

Veauvy, Rollinde, & Azzoug, 2004, p. 43). This legitimacy grants patriarchy symbolic power that makes it difficult to question or dismantle. Yet patriarchy is not unique to Algeria; it is a globally shared organizational pattern, shaping both so-called “open” societies and those described as “conservative,” with varying degrees of patriarchal authority and strength. This is manifested in the everyday lives of individuals, particularly through their social discourse. Values and norms of masculinity and femininity also differ across societies depending on cultural contexts, acquiring meaning only when situated within their specific temporal and spatial frameworks.

The values attributed to masculinity and femininity, according to the dominant stereotypes in patriarchal societies, suggest that authority is granted to men in both private and public domains, across most historical periods marked by patriarchy, following the decline of matriarchal systems which, according to some archaeologists, ethnologists, and anthropologists, once prevailed in societies where authority belonged to women and lineage was traced through the mother.

‘For thousands of years, before the flourishing of metallurgy and the rise of patriarchal civilizations, human societies were organized around feminine values. Woman, as the giver of life, occupied a central place in social and religious structures. Fertility goddesses were venerated, and some matriarchal cultures persisted in isolated regions, bearing witness to a mode of organization based on harmony between humans and nature’ (Burke & Sarda, 2007, pp. 15–16).

As Françoise Héritier observes, *“All societies, including so-called ‘primitive peoples,’ take for granted the existence of fundamental differences between the sexes—formal, biological, and psychological”* (Héritier, 2012, p. 22). Thus, in every society, masculine values differ from feminine ones and are considered complementary, indicating that *“in all times and places there exists a mature sex and an immature sex, a strong sex and a weak sex”* (Héritier, 2012, p. 69), as defined by each society. However, this does not mean that masculine and feminine values necessarily carry discriminatory content in all societies, or that they invariably place men in positions of dominance and women in positions of submission; the reverse may also be possible. Anthropology and ethnology confirm the existence of societies where gender inequalities are clearly shown to be social constructs rather than natural givens. A prime example is Margaret Mead’s classic study in New Guinea, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935), which demonstrated that gender differences are cultural rather than biological (Le Breton, 2014, p. 127).

Within this framework, we collected a set of values associated with masculinity and femininity as represented in Algerian society and in most patriarchal societies, where they are most prominent—such as strength/weakness, intelligence/emotion, permanence/fragility, activity/inactivity—and projected them onto the Algerian social reality. It became evident that these conceptions tend to glorify masculine traits while depicting feminine traits in a derogatory manner. These conceptions manifest in oppositional binaries that reflect an unequal distribution of attributes between the sexes, as though these traits were exclusive to one gender and could not coexist in both. Biases emerge that make certain traits appear as “exceptions” when attributed to a particular group—for example, the assumption that men do not cry, or that women are not intelligent.

Yet masculinity does not necessarily mean harshness or emotional dryness, for men also cry, and crying is not weakness but a human expression of pain, joy, or emotion. Men are no less human than others. Likewise, intelligence is not an exception; women too are intelligent. Women cannot be reduced to emotion or beauty, for intelligence transcends gender, and women excel in thought, science, art, politics, and beyond.

We therefore analyzed and compared some of these binaries in order to uncover their symbolic and social significance within the Algerian context.

The Binary of “Permanent Validity / Limited Validity” in Social Representations of Gender

Social representations in the Algerian patriarchal context reveal a stark distinction between masculinity and femininity, expressed through the binary of “permanent validity / limited validity.” Men are granted the status of permanent actors, while women are reduced to bodies of limited validity—perceived merely as recipients (containers) whose function expires. Men are viewed as “non-expiring persons,”

retaining sexual and social agency even in old age, whereas women's validity is tied to their reproductive capacity and considered "expired" once that capacity is lost. This perception is reinforced through popular sayings such as *"There is always your sister in the market"* (*kayn okhtak fi souq*), which implies the abundance and replaceability of women, or expressions like *"She missed the train"* (*fathael-train*) referring to unmarried women who have surpassed the socially acceptable age for marriage (Abbas, 2016, p. 23). Such women are likened to "barren land" that no longer produces, labeled with terms such as *"charfa"* or *"baira"* (spinster).

Socialization contributes to the entrenchment of these distinctions, teaching girls that their value is realized only through marriage and childbearing—particularly the bearing of sons—as expressed in the proverb: *"A woman has nothing but a son or the grave"* (*lemra malha illa edhkar wala l'qabr*). This conception, often justified by physiological differences, transforms women into "objects" whose function ends with the termination of fertility, according to societal standards. Such a view reflects not merely biological discrimination but a symbolic structure that reproduces social differences through language, proverbs, and everyday practices. It calls for critical deconstruction linking reproductive authority to social recognition, and exposing how women's value is constructed in relation to time, the body, and reproductive function.

The Binary of "Male Leader / Female Subordinate"

Responsibility in Algerian society carries divergent meanings depending on gender. For men, being "responsible" signifies rank and high status, portraying them as rulers, decision-makers, and authoritative figures. By virtue of being male, they are positioned as those who hold others accountable rather than being held accountable themselves. Errors in management or decision-making are not interpreted as deficiencies in their abilities or competence, precisely because they are men.

By contrast, women in positions of responsibility face social resistance, often manifesting in harassment, particularly from men. They are subjected to negative moral judgments, accused of immorality or of obtaining positions through illegitimate means rather than competence. Women are generally portrayed as the cause of men's "misery" and of rising unemployment, on the grounds that they occupy jobs at lower wages instead of remaining at home. This perception is reflected in popular sayings such as: *"If women stayed at home, no man would be unemployed"* (*loukan nssa qaadou fi dar batta rajel ma yakoun choumaj*), or *"A woman's place is in the kitchen"* (*lemra blaset'ha fel kouzina*). Women are thus considered intruders in the world of work. As Kateb notes: *"In the past, women were excluded from economic activity and the public sphere, often confined with no options other than marriage"* (Kateb, 2015, pp. 13–14). Consequently, women's entry today into the labor market and higher positions is perceived as an illegitimate privilege.

The Binary of "Intelligence / Emotion"

Success in various domains is often attributed to men, while failure is linked to women, as expressed in the popular saying: *"The women's market is a fragile market"* (*souq nssa souq rash*). In Algerian society, men are presented as competent and skilled, with mastery considered an exclusively masculine trait. They are portrayed as capable of undertaking difficult tasks deemed nearly impossible for women, who are perceived as weak and emotional beings. Men's work is often classified as high-quality, assumed to rely on scientific methods and rationality. By virtue of being men, they are presumed to excel in technical sciences and mathematics, fields associated with reason.

Conversely, women are blamed for various forms of failure, particularly in child-rearing, which is considered their primary social duty, while not regarded as a male responsibility. In everyday discourse, especially between spouses, children's success is attributed to the father with pride, through expressions such as *"His father's son"* (*walid babab*) or *"Her father's daughter"* (*bent bababa*). In cases of failure, blame is directed at the mother, with phrases such as *"Your daughter"* or *"Your son"* (*bentek / walidek*), or through societal reproach: *"You didn't know how to raise them."* Sensitive or emotionally expressive boys are attributed to their mothers, described as *"mother's son"* (*walid yemab*) or *"fils à maman"*, and negatively

labeled as spoiled, since Algerian mentality expects boys to be tough and rough. For girls, however, tenderness and gentleness are considered exclusively feminine traits, expressed in sayings such as *"bent yama-ha"* (her mother's daughter).

Thus, masculine values are considered positive when embodied by men, but negative when embodied by women, as they fail to conform to their social gender. Feminine values remain negative, especially when embodied by men. Here, Pierre Bourdieu's analysis is relevant, as he identified "a whole series of mythical-ritual oppositions: high/low, above/below, dry/wet, active/passive, straight/curved..." (Fournier & Dortier, 2008, pp. 69–87). This analysis demonstrates that patriarchal societies, to varying degrees, evaluate all that is masculine as positive and effective, while all that is feminine is evaluated as negative and ineffective.

Symbolic Boundaries and Social Control

Accordingly, gender values are constructed on the basis of opposition, drawing boundaries between what is considered masculine and what is considered feminine. These limits embody two separate worlds that Algerian society resists intermingling, since each value is attributed exclusively to one sex. Crossing these boundaries is perceived as transgressing red lines and departing from the stereotypical image assigned to each gender, leading to the individual's exclusion from the category of "ordinary" persons (*normaux*) and relegation to the category of "special cases," "deviants," or "the other gender." As a result, individuals are compelled to wear a permanent mask to avoid confronting society, fearing judgment, exclusion, and social rejection. Algerian society thus resembles a "masquerade," where everyone monitors one another, and individuals live primarily to satisfy others.

2. Women and Men Between Freedom and Social Regulation in Algerian Society:

Building on the preceding discussion, how can men and women be socially accepted individuals? In many societies, including Algeria, a particular image of woman and man is constructed and entrenched in collective consciousness: masculinity is sanctified, while femininity is devalued. Anthropologist Sophia Sahiri Ben Hattira, in a study on beliefs and representations associated with the body, notes that *"the birth of a girl has often been considered a source of anxiety, tension, and sometimes rejection"* (Sahiri Ben Hattira, 2008, p. 44). From birth, the male child is granted social status and privileges denied to the female, raised to be the leader, controller, overseer, dominant, strong, intelligent, and rebellious. These values position him at the top of the hierarchy, as the superior sex, preparing him to become the "guardian of honor."

By contrast, women are raised with traits such as obedience, in order to be "socially acceptable." Their social value increases the more they embody the image prescribed by society—femininity and the preservation of virginity. This situation places women in a state of constant vigilance, seeking strategies and tactics to adapt to a changing social reality while simultaneously maintaining their traditional image and family reputation. Their social acceptance depends on the trust of the "watchers"—male relatives—who remain ever ready to perform the role of "guardians of honor." Women are thus prepared to become "guardians of honor" and "guardians of customs and traditions."

Accordingly, women in Algerian society are subjected to continuous surveillance by male relatives, with the preservation of their honor considered essential to safeguarding the family's reputation. Any breach of this condition can turn their lives and those of their families into a nightmare, sometimes leading to attempts to "erase the shame" through so-called "honor crimes." This explains a certain fear of the female sex, reflected in the popular saying about an unmarried girl: *"The girl is a bomb" (el-tafla bomba)*, indicating the perceived danger of her social position.

Daily practices further reveal this discrimination: news of a male fetus is greeted with congratulations and joy, while news of a female fetus prompts consolatory phrases such as *"Never mind," "A girl is also*

fine, never mind,” or “*A girl is better than having no children at all.*” These expressions serve more as consolation than celebration, implicitly reflecting the perception of the female as a second-class, often unwanted being. Some fathers are even nicknamed “*Abu al-Banat*” (“father of girls”), a label that socially diminishes the status of men without sons.

Thus, the social environment grants men a recognized status and relative freedom, while constantly reminding women of their subordinate position. Despite the transformations Algeria has undergone, society remains governed by the authority of taboos and prohibitions that regulate the behavior of both men and women. No one escapes these mechanisms, which function as instruments of social and symbolic regulation.

From this emerges the central sociological question: **What are the determinants of masculinity and femininity in Algerian society?** In other words, what values and norms define men and women and determine their place within the social structure, and how are these determinants translated into daily practices, popular discourse, and forms of surveillance and domination exercised over bodies, voices, and social presence?

Determinants of Masculinity and Femininity in Algerian Society

It cannot be denied that women’s behavior is subject to strict control in Algerian society, requiring them to act “as women” according to prescribed femininity. The more obedient and submissive they are, the more socially accepted they become. Yet men are also subjected to forms of control, particularly from other men, through challenges and provocations such as: “*If you are a man, do this or that*” or “*If you do this, we will recognize you as a man.*” These expressions serve to test virility and measure masculinity through specific practices, especially in relation to women. A man’s masculinity is tested by his ability to monitor and control the women of his family; the stricter his surveillance, the more successful he is deemed in proving his manhood. Conversely, failure to do so diminishes or even strips him of masculinity in the eyes of society.

From this, we can conclude that women in Algerian society are reduced to “bodies,” through which femininity and its determinants are defined, while men are reduced to a set of behaviors and practices that define masculinity and its determinants.

Determinants of Femininity in Algerian Society

The determinants of femininity that render women socially acceptable are constructed on the basis of their submission to multiple mechanisms of surveillance targeting their bodies, fragmented as domains of symbolic regulation operating on two complementary levels:

1. Upper-body surveillance

- **Surveillance of Thought:** This represents one of the most significant mechanisms of social regulation directed at women, taking multiple forms. Direct surveillance may involve restricting women’s freedom to use technological tools (internet, mobile phones, computers, cars), limiting their participation in political and cultural life, preventing them from entering certain public spaces or engaging in sports socially classified as masculine, obstructing their pursuit of higher education, or denying them driving licenses and political party membership. Indirect surveillance manifests in attacks on women who demand rights beyond basic necessities (food, shelter, clothing), aiming to suppress their will and prevent them from claiming rights socially reserved for men, such as political participation. Even when women obtain such rights, they are framed as “privileges” granted by the generosity of male relatives or husbands. Rights are thus transformed into conditional favors, keeping women in symbolic dependency.

- **Surveillance of the Face:** The face is a key site of symbolic regulation. Blushing is interpreted as a sign of modesty and chastity, evidence of good behavior according to prevailing norms. Women who fail to display such signs are labeled “*masculinized*” (*moustarjila*), deviating from acceptable

femininity. Modesty, in this context, functions as social protection against stigma or negative perceptions that may even lead to divorce, as reflected in the proverb: “*Not married like others, married better than others, divorced—shame of others.*” In the social imaginary, modesty is depicted as an ornament enhancing female beauty, though standards of beauty vary across societies. Surveillance of the face thus reproduces gender values, linking proper feminine behavior to modesty and transforming it into a criterion of social acceptance and integration.

- **Surveillance of the Eyes:** The eyes are another site of symbolic regulation. In Algerian society, modesty requires women to lower their gaze, especially when addressing men, to avoid looking at strangers or gazing from windows into the street, and to refrain from directing their eyes toward anything deemed immodest. The female gaze is burdened with moral responsibility, with women blamed for every glance, while the male gaze is subjected to far less scrutiny. Women are permitted to express emotions through tears, whereas men are forbidden to cry, as crying is considered a sign of weakness linked to femininity. Men who cry are mocked as effeminate, as expressed in the popular saying: “*Don’t cry or shed tears like women, you are a man.*” These practices reveal a social mechanism that reproduces gender differences by regulating the female gaze and associating it with modesty, while linking the male gaze to strength and emotional restraint. Modesty and crying thus become symbolic markers of femininity and weakness.

- **Surveillance of the Mouth and Tongue:** This is among the most prominent forms of symbolic regulation directed at women. Strict linguistic rules limit their freedom of expression: women are forbidden to raise their voices and are expected to speak in modest language, avoiding words deemed socially “shameful” or vulgar, which are associated with masculinity. Men, by contrast, are granted greater boldness in speech, even to the extent of using body-related expressions considered inappropriate for women. Language itself is thus gendered: women are required to embody silence or discretion, as reflected in the proverb: “*A woman must hold her tongue.*” Women are also expected to speak less in male-dominated public spaces, such as cafés, to avoid attracting attention or suspicion that could expose them to harassment or accusations of provocation. Surveillance extends to everyday practices, with women socially prohibited from consuming certain foods in public—such as chewing gum, bananas, lollipops, or ice cream without a spoon—since these acts may be interpreted as immodest signals. These practices demonstrate that surveillance of the mouth and tongue is not merely behavioral regulation but a mechanism for reproducing gender differences, controlling women’s language and symbolic presence in public space, while granting men greater freedom of speech and expression.

2. Lower-Body Surveillance: Control over the Female Body

- **Control over the Stomach:** In Algerian society, women are expected to embody values of patience and contentment, often sacrificing even food for the benefit of male family members or guests, as expressed in the social saying “*lemra sabar*”(woman is patient). These practices are also tied to beauty standards, where women are required to be slim in order to be accepted in the marriage market, resembling the image of a fashion model or doll. This is reinforced by the popular proverb “*al-zeinlinnsa*”(beauty belongs to women), which reduces women’s value to their physical appearance.

- **Control over the Sexual Organs:** Surveillance of women’s sexuality represents one of the most prominent mechanisms of social regulation. Women are subjected to intense psychological pressure on their wedding night. After years of socialization warning them against sexual activity and framing it as “*shameful*”, they are suddenly expected to perform what was previously forbidden, under double pressure: from the husband eager to consummate the marriage after being deprived in a conservative society, and from his family demanding proof of his masculinity. Women’s honor and chastity are reduced to the hymen, examined as evidence of virginity, leaving women in constant fear of losing this “proof”, which is treated as exoneration from betraying the family. Some families even resort to magical rituals to preserve a girl’s virginity—practices that, though declining, still persist in certain regions of Algeria.

Additionally, women are pressured to perform the so-called “*marital duty*”, even in contexts of humiliation or absence of consent. Women are blamed for marital abandonment if they refuse or if the husband arbitrarily leaves the marital bed. This concept itself reveals the denial of women’s right to

sexual pleasure based on mutual consent, transforming intimacy from a space of love and sharing into one of pain and submission. These practices show that women's sexuality is treated as a zone of honor and chastity, monitored and regulated through multiple social and symbolic mechanisms, reproducing gender hierarchy and reinforcing women's subordination in intimate relations.

- **Control over the Legs:** Women's daily mobility is strictly regulated. They are required to avoid male-dominated public spaces and places considered suspicious, such as clubs or shisha cafés. Women must walk quickly in public spaces to appear busy or simply passing through, thereby preserving their reputation as *"bente familia"* (daughter of a respectable family). They are expected to remain distant from places where men gather, mastering strategies of avoidance.

Determinants of Masculinity in Algerian Society

Masculinity is constructed through behaviors and practices that prove male virility. Boys are raised with the conviction that they are leaders, expected never to resemble women, who are portrayed in traditional mentality as weak beings. Girls, by contrast, are socialized to be guided and directed, needing constant supervision.

Men are socially designated as guardians of family honor, tasked with protecting its reputation. They are expected never to relinquish their rights, and to use force if necessary to reclaim them. Failure to defend one's rights diminishes a man's value, subjects him to contempt, and excludes him socially. A man who does not embody masculine values or behave in a "manly" way is not considered socially acceptable.

Men who fail to assert themselves or lack strong social presence are deemed "deficient" and stigmatized with derogatory labels that mark them for life, sometimes extending to their children across generations. Such labels include: *"li ma ydaffa'sb 'ala haqou mashi rajel"* (he who does not defend his rights is not a man), *"dalaylou"*, *"jayeb"*, *"arat erjal"* (shame of men), *"bahloul"* (fool), *"madhloul"* (humiliated), among many others. Men who fail to embody socially defined masculinity and virility are excluded from the category of men and pay a heavy price through stigmatization that negates their manhood.

Although men are forgiven for many mistakes or "vices," three issues are considered fundamental determinants of masculinity, through which virility is proven:

- **Presence in the Public Sphere:** In Algerian society, men's presence in public space is considered essential to proving masculinity. Daily confrontation and visibility are expected, as men are supposed to face challenges rather than hide like cowards. The home is considered a feminine domain, while the street is reserved for men. This is expressed in the saying: *"al-zenqa lil-rijal wal-dar lil-mra"* (the street is for men, the home for women). Public space functions as a "laboratory" for testing virility, where men register their presence in the world of *"rajula"* (manhood). Absence from this space is interpreted as loss of value and respect, and men are stigmatized with derogatory labels such as *"ma kan ma kan"* (he is nothing), *"ma kan walou"* (worthless), or even addressed by women's names, implying feminization. Staying at home is equated with cowardice and fear, expressed in sayings like *"baytouti"* (homebound) or *"yitkhaba fi dar ki nssa"* (hides at home like women). These expressions strip men of masculinity and liken them to women, considered secondary in the social hierarchy.

- **Confrontation:** Masculinity and virility are tied to men's ability to assert their presence in public space. This presence is essential to gaining respect among other men. Without it, men lose their symbolic authority and social titles such as *"rajil"*, *"jahl"*, *"rajla"*, or *"les hommes"*. The street is the true arena for proving masculinity, while the home is seen as the feminine domain. Continuous confrontation—through physical presence or vocal assertion—functions as a daily renewal of male honor. Confrontation may escalate into physical conflict when family honor is violated, making defense and aggression part of the mechanisms of maintaining masculinity and social dominance.

- **Surveillance:** To prove masculinity, men are expected to act as "watchers," both inside and outside the household.

- **Internal Surveillance:** Within the home, men protect the family's moral symbolism by controlling women's presence. They ensure that female relatives are hidden from the gaze of outsiders (*barani*), preventing them from being seen or heard. Women's voices are considered extensions of their bodies, and only men's voices are permitted to rise as expressions of authority. Heavy curtains are

added to windows and balconies to prevent outsiders from glimpsing women or their silhouettes, especially when dressed in ways deemed inappropriate. Women are prohibited from appearing or speaking from windows or balconies to avoid being seen or heard by strangers, under the rule of *"la tara ma la turā"* (do not see and do not be seen). Raising a woman's voice outside the home is considered shameful, prompting admonitions such as *"lower your voice outside"* or *"go join the men if you want to speak loudly."* A household where women's voices are heard is considered without a male guardian, likened to a house without a door. Internal surveillance thus functions as a symbolic mechanism reproducing male authority by regulating women's presence and preventing breaches of the boundary between private and public.

- **External Surveillance:** Men also regulate women's movements outside the home, controlling their times of departure and return, and imposing rules for crossing the domestic threshold. Men who perform this role earn titles such as *"argax"* or *"les hommes"*, considered the highest ranks of masculinity, replacing *"fahl."* Conversely, men who fail to exercise such control are stigmatized with labels such as *"farsha"* (trampled), *"ma fihshaba rajla"* (lacking manhood), or *"taliqlabbilu"* (loosening his rope), indicating loss of authority over family women. Masculinity and virility are thus tied to men's ability to control the behavior and mobility of female relatives, including mothers if not elderly. A man's masculinity remains contingent upon the reputation and conduct of the women in his family.

Conclusion

Despite the structural transformations that Algerian society has witnessed in recent decades—suggesting a degree of gender equality, as reflected in the increasing enrollment of women in educational institutions, their growing participation in social, economic, and political life, and their expanding presence in public space—a critical sociological and anthropological analysis of the values and norms associated with femininity and masculinity reveals the continued reproduction of traditional gender models that perpetuate symbolic and material inequalities between the sexes.

Men are still presented as the "guarantors of family honor" and as monitors of women's behavior, while women are reduced to being the "face of honor," subjected to collective surveillance exercised through discourse and everyday practices. This differential distribution of roles is reinforced through socialization, which distinguishes between boys and girls from childhood and instills divergent values that lead to unequal access to resources, power, and symbolic representation.

In this context, demands for equality are often understood in dominant discourses as a denial of biological differences or as an attempt to erase "natural" distinctions between the sexes, rather than as a call to achieve equal opportunities and to distribute roles and positions on the basis of competence rather than gender. Transcending gendered divisions of tasks and spaces does not mean abolishing difference; rather, it requires recognizing the shared rationality of individuals—men and women alike—and instilling in them the same values and socialization processes that prepare them for equal participation in public life.

Accordingly, achieving genuine equality requires dismantling the symbolic structures that perpetuate gender disparities and reconstructing a social conception in which the individual is recognized as a rational being, not as a body or a sex. The concept of the "person" does not carry a predetermined gender; that person may be a man or a woman. Hence, there is a pressing need for non-differential socialization that instills shared values and lays the foundation for a more just and equitable society—placing the right person in the right position, rather than assigning roles according to gender. Social progress can only be achieved by transcending gender classification in the distribution of roles and relying instead on competence and shared rationality, not on biological sex. Rebuilding a fair social conception does not entail denying difference, but rather interrogating it and deconstructing the symbols of domination and inequality attached to it.

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