

The Role of the Algerian School in Regulating Gender Relations: A Field Study at Hassiba Ben Bouali School, Mascara, Algeria

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Abstract :

The school is one of the social institutions that operates within the wider structure of society according to specific rules. It has become specialized in educational and cultural practice. In this respect, its function intersects with that of the family and complements it. It also shares with the family the task of socialization in line with the dominant values and norms.

Through our field study on female teachers' perceptions of the role of the Algerian school in organizing and defining gender relations, we also sought to understand the relationship between the family and the school in the production and reproduction of relations between the sexes. We explored these perceptions through the views of female teachers as women who had themselves once been pupils. This made it possible to connect two different periods: the past and the present. The study showed that the school still

preserves and reinforces patriarchal culture in shaping relations between males and females.

Keywords: school, patriarchal culture, gender, patriarchy, university, youth

Introduction:

The family and the school are among the most important social institutions concerned with building values and consolidating them in the minds of young people. The school reflects changes in the ideas of members of society through their social conditions. It also mirrors their aspirations, especially with regard to relations between men and women.

This field study is a descriptive study. It aims to identify the characteristics of the social perception of gender relations among young people. In other words, it examines "socially patterned interactions between men and women" (Anthony Giddens, 2005, p. 755).

This is because the conceptual structure of masculinity and femininity is not fixed. It is not a rigid structure from which the researcher simply extracts symbols and meanings. Rather, it is a dynamic structure shaped by general social relations. It exists within the mechanisms of the expanded reproduction of society. This relationship changes with changing social and historical conditions, in line with the movement of society and its culture. Society therefore imposes gender patterns and regulates gender relations through mechanisms of domination enforced by a system that legitimizes dominance as a cultural construction, or as deeply rooted cultural structures that are difficult to uproot. These structures are reproduced within social institutions. The family, for example, is built on relations of domination and submission. Within this system, the male represents the main reference point for femininity. By contrast, a woman who is not linked to a man has no recognized status in society.

Based on the data drawn from our exploratory study, we traced gender relations within the school environment. We sought to identify the social institutions that produce gendered relations according to female teachers' social representations. We also examined the relationship that links the school and educational institutions to society, beginning with the family, which is considered the basic unit in the construction of society.

The research problem revolves around the following question: How does the family influence the reproduction of gender hierarchy within the Algerian school, according to female teachers' perceptions?

The research hypotheses were as follows:

1. The family plays a central role in socialization based on gender differentiation, despite girls' success in education.
2. The return and spread of the phenomena of limiting girls' education and early marriage constitute mechanisms that shape relations between the sexes.

Our field study falls within the qualitative approach, with the aim of reaching a deeper understanding of the meanings present in the research field. We therefore adopted a socio-anthropological method to study the subject. As far as possible, we sought to obtain two types of data. The first concerned the image of the Algerian family and the way it dealt with the socialization of boys and girls, so that we could identify the changes that had taken place. The second concerned the features of continuity and change in the value system that has affected certain social institutions, such as the school. From this perspective, it becomes possible to establish the link between family and school.

Several methodological considerations guided the selection of the research population. The reason for choosing young female teachers was that they had lived through school conditions themselves and carried memories of their childhood as shaped by their social representations. At the same time, they were able to observe the differences between themselves and the generation of pupils whom they now teach. The research population consisted of 14 female teachers at Hassiba Ben Bouali School in the city of Mascara. The study was conducted between December 2023 and October 2024.

We relied on direct observation, as it was the preferred technique during the exploratory stage. It helped shape the direction of our research and enabled us to understand many meanings and situations that required further examination during the interview stage. Unstructured interviews were also used as an exploratory technique in order to understand the logic of relations between women and men in teachers' social representations.

1. Definition of Concepts

1.1. Social Representations

The concept of collective representations has generally been associated with myths, rituals, and forms of thought that characterize a given society. Because of its broad scope, and because it encompasses all forms of social

thinking, it has become difficult to distinguish representations from mentalities and ideology. As a result, the concept has come to denote a phenomenon, but not an operational one (Ferreol Gilles, 1995, p. 249).

Serge Moscovici defines social representations as a dynamic process through which reality is interpreted and reconstructed. This process reflects and includes a set of principles, ideas, and values that exist and are shared among members of a group. Moscovici also emphasizes their dual nature. On the one hand, they involve verbal production, which refers to contents organized into themes and discourses about reality. On the other hand, they involve mental activity as a system through which everything new is assimilated (Serge Moscovici, 1976, p. 48).

1.2. Gender

Gender is a relatively recent concept, but it is widely used in the social sciences. It focuses on power relations and differences between women and men, and on their effects on social, economic, political, and cultural roles. These roles are dynamic and constantly changing according to time, place, and the prevailing cultural context. Biological roles alone remain constant, most notably women's reproductive role, which differs from that of men (Souad Youssef Nour El-Din, 2006, p. 25).

1.3. Family

The term family is used to refer to “the smallest clan-based grouping or kin group, and the lowest level in the hierarchy of lineage calculation” (Zuhair Hatab, 1976, p. 43). In some studies, the term family is not treated as synonymous with household or extended family. For example, in his study *The Development of Arab Family Structures and the Historical and Social Roots of Their Contemporary Issues*, Zuhair Hatab argues that the word *usra* (family) carries the image of social life in miniature during the pre-Islamic era, when people were bound to tribes, clans, and lineages. In this sense, the term appears to derive from the verb *asara*. It may also be another form of the verb *azara*, meaning to support, strengthen, or reinforce, through the substitution of *s* for *z*, a known and frequent occurrence in Arabic. By contrast, the term *‘a’ila* is more recent. It is derived from the verb *‘ala* and reveals its intended meaning, namely a group of individuals supported by a provider or breadwinner (Al-Taher Labib, 2007, p. 167).

The family constitutes the nucleus of social organization and the center of economic activity in society. People’s lives revolve around it, regardless of their mode of life or social belonging. It also serves as the intermediary between the individual and society, and as the institution through which individuals and groups largely inherit their religious, cultural, and political affiliations

(Halim Barakat, 1998, p. 171). 2. The Role of the Algerian Family in Gender Hierarchy

The family has contributed to the reproduction of patriarchal relations and values through discrimination between the sexes. This appears in the unequal distribution of freedoms, responsibilities, and privileges, as well as in differences in treatment. The female pupil is socialized as a girl who is subject to various discriminatory conditions that undermine her self-confidence, since she grows up within a male-centered value system.

The family has also applied a set of moral rules and behavioral norms as an organized chain of social practices endorsed by patriarchal culture in the service of the social order. The most important of these are the education of girls in obedience and the inculcation of modesty and reserve. For this reason, the family focuses, in the socialization of girls, on controlling the female body by imposing a number of rules concerning dress, sitting posture, bodily movement, and speech. From an early age, the girl learns how to manage her body through bodily restraint, specific ways of sitting and walking, and disciplined conduct. The mother works hard to instill the idea that a girl should neither play with boys nor mix with them, and that she should not trust men, regardless of the degree of kinship. Through the gaze, walking style, bodily movement, and clothing of women, the patriarchal society judges whether

a girl has been properly raised according to the foundations of the social order.

Although girls leave the home to attend educational institutions, this does not mean that they become independent. Rather, they remain fully subject to the institution of the family through the moral and behavioral rules in which they were raised at the symbolic level. Executive authority is often delegated to the mother. The father generally does not speak directly with his daughters, but communicates through their mother. The brother, in turn, plays a major role in regulating the girl's movements, since she represents the symbolic capital of her family, and her reputation is seen as the reputation of the entire family. This is especially true when the girl is considered beautiful. In such cases, she is often subjected to surveillance and constant monitoring. This form of control may result in coercion and domination aimed at ending her schooling and marrying her off at an early age.

2.1. The Restriction of Girls' Education

Patriarchal culture holds that a girl's education should not lead to the weakening of the boundaries that separate the sexes. For this reason, specific forms of work have been assigned to girls, especially various kinds of domestic labor, depending on the family's mode of life. In many cases, girls are also withdrawn from school at an early age, often at the level of the fifth year of primary education.

It appears that limiting a girl's knowledge, restricting her academic attainment, narrowing the type of learning available to her, and burdening her with household tasks are deliberate measures. This is because the system on which patriarchal society is founded has made access to knowledge subject to hierarchical ranking and to the unequal status of the sexes. It has also linked knowledge to the gender roles each sex is expected to perform upon reaching maturity.

In this regard, one respondent stated: "Many young girls are still prevented from continuing their education to this day, and they are married off."

Early marriage is one of the factors that lead to marital instability. Marriage in Algerian society, like in many other Arab societies, is patriarchal in nature. It sanctifies marriage and works actively to elevate the status of the married person through mechanisms that institutionalize the sacred, such as religion and custom. For men, marriage is regarded as the completion of half of one's religion. For women, it is seen as protection and concealment. Once a person marries, they are expected to learn self-reliance and to assume responsibility for their spouse and family.

From this perspective, early marriage becomes one of the mechanisms that regulate relations between the sexes. Hastening a girl's marriage is one of the methods used by the group to

control gender relations and preserve the social order. One of the negative consequences of early marriage is its association with reproductive health problems and fetal abnormalities when the mother is very young. In cases of marital failure, the young girl may then find herself in the position of a divorced woman, or what is locally referred to as Tahdjal. In this situation, she is no longer fully recognized within society. She may either endure the peak of oppression and social injustice by being confined to the home and completely forbidden from leaving it, or, if she enters the public sphere, she becomes vulnerable to exploitation and predatory behavior within patriarchal society.

“The prohibition imposed on girls from acquiring the means of expression reveals the relationship between knowledge and hierarchical social structure. Preventing girls from receiving education is a means by which society achieves another aim, namely preventing women from assuming important roles in life. It also reflects society’s fear of women’s intellectual authority, since it assumes that once a woman acquires knowledge, she may rise above her husband through her learning, and this may lead to the collapse of his authority over her.” 3. The Association of Domestic Work with the Female Pupil

The girl pupil experiences a double burden. She is often assigned many household tasks, such as washing, sweeping, and even caring for a younger brother or infant sister. It is not unusual to find a girl of no more than eleven years old looking after a baby, learning how to carry the child and wash him or her. What has changed, however, is that some fathers and mothers now encourage their daughters. This change appears in the transformation of domestic roles and skills. Mothers no longer teach their daughters the same household skills as in the past. Instead, they encourage them to succeed in their studies while still performing routine domestic tasks, partly as preparation for their future role as wives. As one respondent, a teacher, stated: “I owe my success in education to my mother. It was thanks to her that I succeeded in my studies. She was the one who encouraged me and my sisters to pursue learning and education.”

This shows how some parents, especially educated ones, support the education of both their sons and daughters. They encourage them to pursue academic and professional advancement in the future and provide them with the means necessary for success. One clear indication of this is the growing number of women in universities and their academic achievement.

Despite the continuous and never-ending domestic responsibilities borne by the girl

pupil, there was often a strong determination to succeed academically. Hisham Sharabi, in his book *Introduction to the Study of Arab Society*, referred to preliminary findings on differences in the upbringing of boys and girls based on twenty years of teaching experience. He found that the excessive attention given to boys at the expense of girls sometimes grants the girl a certain degree of freedom, which enables her to develop her inner capacities. As a result, her personality is formed at an early stage. Based on his observations of Arab students at the American University of Beirut, he also noted that female students were more independent and more self-reliant than male students (Hisham Sharabi, 1982, p. 91).

4. The Role of the Algerian School in Reinforcing Patriarchy

The school is one of the institutions of civil society that has specialized in the field of educational and cultural practice. In this respect, the school's function converges with that of the family and complements it. Through its participation in the process of socialization, and in accordance with the prevailing hierarchy of values and rules, it contributes to the transmission, teaching, and dissemination of knowledge and learning (Haimar Abdel Salam, 1999, p. 55).

Among the values that the school has helped to reinforce is the ethic of differentiation and hierarchy between the sexes.

4.1. Boys and Girls at School

The female teachers who formed the research population were educated in mixed schools. The school contributed to reproducing the policy of differentiation already imposed within families. It also participated in the construction of gender relations through gender-based divisions imposed on pupils through bodily codes and dress. Girls were expected to care for long hair and clean fingernails as markers of femininity. They were also primarily required to wear a pink school smock. By contrast, blue was designated for boys. Boys, in turn, were forbidden to resemble girls in appearance or even in the way they spoke.

It is important to point out the central role played by the family during childhood in shaping pupils' identities through the transformation of certain norms and the consolidation of the value system approved by the social order. Family influence is therefore crucial in the construction of social personality and sexual identity among both boys and girls. It offers models of men and women, as well as of fathers and mothers, and defines some roles as masculine and others as feminine (Alain Bihl, 1998, p. 13).

The mother plays a more central role than the father in the socialization of children and in shaping and directing them so that boys become men and girls become women in

distinct ways. Several respondents pointed to the role of mothers in encouraging their daughters' educational paths. They stated: "My mother was the one who encouraged me to study. She always told me: study, my daughter, do not become like me. The same is true of schoolgirls today. They owe much to their mothers, and also to some fathers." Even when poor families are preoccupied with securing a livelihood and are unable to monitor their children's schooling closely, either because they are illiterate or have limited cultural and educational capital, parental follow-up, especially by the mother, still takes the form of advice and guidance intended to help children complete their schoolwork and succeed academically.

The female teacher usually organizes pupils in the classroom according to gender in order to preserve order and calm. Here again, we can see how patriarchal culture shapes the logic of gender division. The girl has already learned from her family not to mix with the opposite sex. Some teachers drew our attention to the difference in girls' seating arrangements. When a girl sits next to another girl, they often become engaged in talking and chatting during the lesson, which may create disorder in the classroom. But when she sits next to a boy, the situation changes. Their interaction is different from the outset. Their bodies remain apart, and a physical space emerges between them, shaped by modesty, silence, and fear. Even in

the schoolyard, one finds a gender-based division between boys and girls in play and in group formation. Conclusion

Society has entrusted the school with the responsibility of playing a role complementary to that of the family in the process of socialization. The school is "a product of its time and place. It comes after the family and reproduces educational methods based on discipline, exclusion, and violence." There remains a wide gap between the achievements women have made through their entry into all social, economic, and political fields, and the stereotypical images still reflected in school curricula. In these curricula, the role of men is associated with breadwinning and the public sphere, whereas the role of women remains confined to motherhood and domestic work. Most representations of women are linked to closed social spaces, such as the kitchen, rather than to open spaces.

The school has thus contributed to the reinforcement of patriarchy. Values that reject mixing between the sexes and that uphold gender-based division are still present in Algerian society, although they now appear in forms and methods that vary according to what is commonly found in patriarchal societies. The school therefore plays a central role in reproducing the social relations that prevail within both the family and society, since it is an institution whose function complements

that of the family. Despite the social injustice and violence experienced by some schoolgirls, whether within the family or in the public sphere, many have still embraced the challenge and persisted in achieving academic success.

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