

## THE ELDERLY IN ALGERIAN SOCIETY BETWEEN THEORY AND REALITY: A STUDY OF THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL STATUS IN LIGHT OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

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### Abstract:

This study examines the status of the elderly in Algerian society through an analysis of the social, economic, cultural, and political transformations that have taken place since independence and their impact on family structure and the role of older adults within it. The study is based on the assumption that the transition from a traditional society to a modern one has led to a redistribution of roles within the family, affecting the symbolic authority of the elderly, particularly in light of the decline of the extended family and the rise of the nuclear family, as well as changes in production systems and social relations.

The research adopts a sociological analytical approach, drawing on major theories of aging such as disengagement theory and activity theory. It also explores the transformations affecting the Algerian family structure in its economic, political, and cultural dimensions. The findings show that the status of the elderly has not disappeared but has been reshaped within a new value system. While traditional authority has declined, symbolic and social respect for the

elderly persists, especially due to enduring religious and cultural values.

The study concludes that the condition of the elderly in Algeria results from a complex interaction between modern transformations and the persistence of traditional structures, leading to a dual situation characterized by partial marginalization alongside continued symbolic status.

**Keywords:** Elderly, Algerian society, social change, Algerian family, social status, cultural change, aging.

### Introduction:

The issue of aging is among the most important topics raised in recent times. Although its origins are as old as humanity itself, aging remains a life stage that individuals inevitably pass through, like other stages of life. It is characterized by specific features such as weakness, fragility, disability, and a decline in physiological and biological performance. What has made this topic particularly relevant today are the social and economic transformations that have affected society, influencing the ways in which the

elderly are present and shaping the evolution of their status and roles within both formal and informal institutions.

In traditional and rural settings alike, the elderly once held significant status and responsibility. They were entrusted with major roles and occupied a respected symbolic capital within their communities. Decision-making authority, as well as the power to command, prohibit, and legislate, rested in their hands—regardless of the size or nature of the social organization, whether at the level of the community (such as councils) or the family. Through this, they enjoyed prestige, dignity, and elevated social standing.

However, the social transformations that have affected society have reduced the scope of these responsibilities and roles assigned to the elderly. Consequently, their roles and status within modern organizations—economic, political, and others—have diminished. These institutions increasingly assign responsibilities and positions based on educational level, competence, and expertise, rather than age or seniority, which were the primary criteria in traditional systems.

These transformations have also affected the elderly within the family. A significant shift can be observed in the role of the father in modern, widely spread family structures. In traditional families, the father was the central authority and cornerstone in all matters, holding absolute decision-making power. In modern families, however, his position has shifted toward a more egalitarian status with other members. These

familial transformations in Algerian society, particularly concerning the father's role as a major representation of this change, have influenced various aspects—ranging from the decline in his roles and the transformation of relational patterns within the family, to a reduction in forms of solidarity and mutual support compared to the past. This has, in one way or another, impacted the status of the elderly within the family.

In light of the above, the following research question is raised:

- What are the forms of transformations that have affected the Algerian family, and what is their impact on the symbolic value of the elderly within Algerian society?

Through this research paper, we will attempt to address:

the main theoretical approaches to aging and the elderly stage, in addition to developments in the social status of elderly groups through examining their social position, social roles, and the factor of aging, as well as intergenerational coexistence between conflict and integration. We will also discuss the status and role of the elderly within the framework of social transformations in Algeria, ultimately arriving at the characteristics of the evolution of the Algerian family and its impact on the status of the elderly.

## **Significance of the Study:**

This study lies in monitoring social transformations in Algeria and highlighting how economic and cultural changes affect the family as the nucleus of society. It also aims to identify the status of the elderly within the family system by clarifying their traditional role as a symbol of wisdom and collective memory, as well as their role under modern transformations. Furthermore, the study seeks to reveal the symbolic dimension of the elderly's role, which extends beyond the family to reflect broader changes in social values and symbolism. It also contributes sociologically to understanding the relationship between participation (integration) and exclusion.

## **Section One: Main Theoretical Approaches to the Elderly and the Stage of Aging:**

In this section, we will address the most important theories that have dealt with the topic of aging and the elderly as follows:

### **Section One: Disengagement Theory**

Disengagement theory, developed by Elaine Cumming and William E. Henry in 1963, posits that successful aging involves a gradual withdrawal from the social sphere, accompanied by a corresponding tendency among others to reduce their expectations of older adults and limit interaction with them. This process operates at three levels:

- **Social level:** The elderly individual is expected to relinquish roles they can no longer perform efficiently, thereby allowing younger individuals to assume them.
- **Individual level:** Disengagement serves as a mechanism for maintaining balance between the declining capacities of the elderly person and the expectations associated with their social roles.
- **Psychological level:** It involves preserving emotional resources, enabling the individual to focus on preparing for the end of life (Al-Zubaidi, 2009).

## **Section Two: Activity Theory**

Most perspectives on aging agree that older adults possess the same psychological and social needs as middle-aged individuals. According to Activity Theory, successful aging is achieved by those who resist the constraints associated with old age and adapt effectively to its changes. This theory explains the isolation of older adults and their lack of roles or activities through several factors:

- The contraction of the elderly person's social world due to retirement, the loss of a spouse or friends, and other limitations affecting social mobility.
- Physical decline, which increases the difficulty of overcoming obstacles and fulfilling personal needs.

Among the key founders of this theory are David Riesman, Robert J. Havighurst, and Neugarten Miller. They emphasized the importance of alternative activities following retirement, which help occupy free time and facilitate readjustment. Miller, in particular, highlighted activities that could serve as new sources of income.

## **Section Two: Developments in the Social Status of the Elderly**

This section examines the social status of older adults, the relationship between social roles and aging, and intergenerational coexistence between conflict and integration.

### **Section One: The Social Status of the Elderly**

In contemporary society, the Algerian family is subject to external and internal social, economic, and cultural influences. These transformations have reshaped family structure and authority patterns, weakened by the fragmentation of extended families into smaller nuclear units. This has led to the erosion of internal family relationships and, consequently, changes in individual roles and social status—particularly for elderly members.

Historically, older adults held a prestigious position in traditional societies, derived from the value of their memory and life experience. As noted by Simone de Beauvoir (1970), in ancient Chinese societies—among the oldest civilizations—paternal authority did not

diminish with age; rather, it increased. Even women, who were often marginalized, regained status as they grew older.

The status of the elderly in such societies was closely tied to cultural contexts shaped by beliefs and religions, as well as harsh socio-economic conditions where reaching the age of sixty-five was relatively rare.

Among the Eskimo (Inuit), the status of the elderly is determined by beliefs, myths, and religious rituals. They are regarded as powerful figures—often seen as healers and bearers of wisdom. Deities themselves are depicted as very old individuals. Consequently, elders occupy an honorable and prestigious position: they oversee religious affairs, safeguard sacred objects used in ceremonies, and transmit cultural heritage. In some tribes, younger members even offer their blood to elders, believing this restores vitality.

Islam also accords great importance to parents, granting them a high status and emphasizing respect and compassion. This is reflected in the teachings of the Qur'an, which calls for gratitude and kindness toward one's parents.

In pre-industrial societies, the elderly were considered a reference for younger generations and a repository of knowledge. The older the individual, the higher their status. Authority was often absolute in their hands, as they acted as mediators and guides whose advice and decisions were widely respected.

However, with the advent of modernity and technological progress, societal conditions have changed significantly. The traditional extended family has gradually transformed into a nuclear structure within a complex industrial and urban environment. This shift has contributed to the weakening and fragmentation of social structures, leading to the marginalization and social isolation of the elderly. In contemporary societies, they are sometimes perceived as a social burden, which negatively affects their psychological well-being and social integration.

As intergenerational bonds weaken (between grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren), the principle of mutual obligation declines, along with the continuity of extended kinship systems. This weakening of traditional authority may generate feelings of inadequacy and social rejection among older adults. Retirement—often accompanied by modest pensions—reduces their economic contribution and limits their ability to fulfill family responsibilities, reinforcing a sense of diminished activity and relevance.

Additionally, children's independence and separation further restrict the elderly's social networks, leading some to isolation and withdrawal. Many may retreat into the past and its achievements rather than engaging with the present and enjoying the outcomes of their lifelong efforts.

## **Section Two: Social Role and the Factor of Aging**

The new structure of the Algerian family has significantly altered its traditional characteristics. The role and status of the father have declined compared to what they were in the traditional extended family, particularly in urban areas. This transformation has largely loosened the behavioral constraints on children, fostering attitudes such as indifference and a tendency toward independence. Among the main causes of this radical shift are the weakening or absence of parental authority, as well as the erosion and disappearance of kinship ties that dissolved alongside the decline of the extended family model.

In traditional societies—especially rural ones—great importance was placed on cohesion and social integration among members of the group. This was achieved through the positive collective participation of all individuals in social interaction, including elders and older adults.

In these societies, beyond the respect and reverence accorded to the elderly, this stage of life was often regarded as one of the best periods of life. It was endowed with qualities that made individuals feel they were in the prime of their existence. Through this, social integration and cohesion of the elderly within community life were achieved (Al-Shirbini, 2000).

From the perspective of social roles, the most important functions performed by the elderly in these simple and traditional societies include activities related to religious and ritual duties, as

well as adjudication and conflict resolution in the absence of formal administrative authorities. This is evident in rural communities through what is known as the “Jama‘a” (village council), where elders of the tribe or village meet to address local issues and disputes. At times, this institution also serves as a mechanism for imposing sanctions on members who violate established norms, customs, and traditions.

It is essential for the elderly to feel that they still play a meaningful role in social life and that both society and their families continue to need their contributions. This sense of usefulness fosters psychological adjustment and, consequently, social adaptation, as social roles are closely linked to the responses and interactions of others (Lille, 1984).

### **Section Three: Intergenerational Coexistence Between Conflict and Integration**

One of the most prominent outcomes of social transformations in Algerian society is the shift in its value system, which has acquired new characteristics influenced both by colonial legacies and by modernization and technological progress. This can be understood through the role of Arab societies in general—and Algerian society in particular—as largely receptive to external influences, both positive and negative. This has accelerated value change and contributed to what is often referred to as intergenerational conflict.

This generational conflict may stem from the spread of individualism, selfishness, indifference, materialism, and the pursuit of rapid economic gain. At the same time, the continuous spread of intellectual, political, and economic currents—alongside the influential role of mass media—has contributed to shaping younger generations with more independent and liberal ideas, sometimes contradicting the beliefs and values of older generations.

These transformations are driven both by external influences and by individuals’ inclination toward autonomy and emancipation from parental authority, even when constrained by social pressure to respect traditional values. Supported by personal ambitions and aspirations for self-realization, this tendency has contributed to the spread of the nuclear family model in Algeria—either through establishing independent households separate from the extended family or through achieving economic independence based on personal effort.

As a result, children have acquired a new status within the family. Educational qualifications have become a key factor in determining competence and responsibility. This new status is clearly reflected in the partial transfer of authority from father to son, particularly when the latter succeeds academically and professionally. Moreover, the aura of respect once reserved for the father—as the guarantor of inherited values—has come to be shared, to some extent, by the son due to his professional

achievements, which are perceived as a success for the entire family and especially for the father.

Families in general, and fathers in particular, take pride in the social success achieved by their children, whether academic or professional. This grants individuals a new status and role within the family. As noted by Mustapha Boutfnouchet (1984), individuals who attain higher socio-professional status generally maintain strong ties with their families, often showing respect and appreciation, while feeling supported and encouraged to pursue paths of social, economic, and cultural advancement in harmony with traditional values.

However, another reality highlighted by studies on generational conflict—such as those by Abdel Ati El-Sayed—is that adherence to values of absolute obedience varies depending on region and income. As one moves from rural to urban contexts, parents tend to become more tolerant toward their children. Conversely, when young people achieve greater economic independence and higher income levels in urban settings, they tend to be less committed to values of parental obedience.

Thus, the sphere of unquestioned respect for the older generation—particularly grandparents and fathers—has narrowed without necessarily leading to direct conflict between tradition and modernity. Respect for traditional values, as emphasized by Mustapha Boutfnouchet, still persists among younger generations, even as external cultural influences introduce change. In

this sense, the new complements rather than replaces the old.

A clear illustration of this integration is found in what economists describe as the “worker–retiree equation,” often viewed as a source of generational tension. However, as noted by Claude Jasmine (1999), it can instead foster solidarity and social bonds between generations. On the one hand, it provides retirees with financial resources after retirement, ensuring a degree of economic independence, supported by social protection policies that reduce the burden on families—especially with increasing life expectancy and the growing number of elderly individuals. On the other hand, it allows older adults to maintain their social status and role within the family through economic contribution and participation.

Thus, even after being stripped of many of his former functions, the father often remains a central figure of family cohesion through his care and contribution to all family members—including those who are economically active—thereby avoiding marginalization within his own household.

### **Section Three: The Status and Role of the Elderly within the Context of Social Transformations in Algeria.**

#### **Section One: Transformations in the Economic Sphere**

Following independence, Algeria emerged as a society weakened in several respects due to the

colonial legacy it inherited from France. This legacy included the expropriation of agricultural land, the scorched-earth policy, and systematic cultural deprivation that limited access to knowledge and education. Consequently, Algeria inherited a war-exhausted society with a devastated and fragile economic base (Boutefnouchet, 2004), characterized by near-total dependence on colonial production systems and orientations. Agricultural production was limited and largely directed toward industrial purposes such as wine and juice production. Light industry collapsed after independence due to the departure of European settlers who had owned most enterprises, while heavy industries—such as iron mining, petroleum, and natural gas—were nationalized by the 1970s (Djabi).

The trajectory of economic transformation in Algeria after independence was largely based on comprehensive development strategies, particularly through the establishment of a heavy industrial base and the development of oil, iron, and steel industries. These economic transformations, carried out under the vision of a “modern Algeria” oriented toward industry, services, and administration, along with the modernization of the agricultural sector—which had employed the majority of Algerians—accelerated the transition from a traditional to a modern economy (Haddab, 1986).

Claudine Chaulet, in her book *“Land, Brotherhood, and Money,”* explains how the

Algerian countryside was modernized through the agrarian revolution and the establishment of socialist villages. These initiatives introduced modern improvements, fostered individual independence from agricultural cooperatives, and replaced family labor with wage labor. This transformation significantly affected rural families and disrupted the traditional distribution of labor within that mode of production (Chaulet, 1984).

Modernization in Algeria unfolded within these economic transformations, particularly during the transition from a colonial economy to a state-controlled socialist economy in the 1970s, especially under the leadership of Houari Boumédiène. His project aimed to modernize Algerian society, develop rural areas, and prioritize heavy industry, which became a central concern of the Algerian state at the time (Lacheraf, 1988).

These transformations had a profound impact on the family structure and the social life of the elderly. The shift from a traditional to a modern economy led to a redefinition of their social roles and status, effectively undermining the traditional system in which the elderly held a prestigious position. In that system, the elder was the leader and central figure of the economic group, exercising authority over decision-making, including marriage arrangements, trade, investment, and resource management. As the owner of land and means of production, the elder controlled the group, distributing roles and labor

as he saw fit. This role was often inherited by the eldest son, reinforcing a system in which social status was determined by age seniority. Thus, the elderly occupied the highest position and bore primary responsibility both within and beyond the family (Chaulet, 1984).

This modernization process was accompanied by a broader social transformation marked by the shift from rural to urban (or “civil”) society. Many traditional values and social principles were altered in the process. A major turning point occurred during the War of Liberation, which displaced many families into population centers, forcing them to abandon agricultural life and traditional family systems and integrate into a new and different social order.

After independence, many families moved to urban areas, transitioning from rural households to urban ones living in apartments and multi-story buildings. Family members began working in national companies and industrial institutions. This transitional phase—marked by the overlap of two social systems—produced various outcomes: individuals became increasingly independent in terms of income and productivity; the father struggled to adapt to the loss of many of his traditional roles and authority; the mother sought new ways to exert influence; and daughters-in-law attempted to establish their own space and exercise personal freedom and autonomy. All these dynamics, in one way or another, affected the status of the elderly within this evolving social structure.

## 1 Section Two: Political Organization

Following the same approach and logic that guided the transformation of the economic system, Algeria also witnessed significant changes in political organization and administrative structures. The shift moved from the traditional tribal system—previously dominant and still preserved in some conservative local communities as a form of social organization—to a modern bureaucratic system.

After independence, Algeria adopted various administrative and political systems that were institutionalized within society. As a result, the traditional system lost many of its prerogatives in favor of the state, local authorities (municipalities and provinces), and party-based political administration led by elites. These reforms aimed to consolidate the concept of the nation-state and strengthen individuals’ attachment to the homeland rather than to tribe or clan (Vatin, 1978). To reinforce this “nation-state” model, a formal civil legal system was established, replacing customary law, which had previously relied on the *jama’a* (village council) or councils of elders.

Within the traditional system, the elderly played a central and influential role. Governance at the village or communal level was entrusted exclusively to senior members of families, tribes, or villages. Their responsibilities included resolving minor disputes, defending the community against internal and external

threats—whether human or natural, such as agricultural risks or natural disasters—negotiating with colonial authorities, and addressing various communal concerns. They also provided assistance to those in need, examined cases of social exclusion, and imposed sanctions on individuals who violated community norms, whether through fines, tribute, or social ostracism.

This *jama'a*, composed primarily of male representatives of prominent families and tribes, was typically dominated by elders. The title “Sheikh,” transmitted across generations, symbolized authority and social prestige. Even today, the term may be used symbolically—for instance, a young teacher may be referred to as “Sheikh” in recognition of his professional role. This traditional organization elevated elders to the highest social positions, granting them authority in decision-making as well as roles in education, guidance, socialization, administration, and governance (Boutefnouchet, 1982).

## **2 Section Three: Cultural Transformations**

Among the most significant developments that Algeria experienced after independence—alongside economic and political changes—was the widespread expansion of education across all segments of society. Education became accessible to all social classes, both poor and wealthy, and extended across urban and rural areas from the north to the far south. Through

policies of universalization, free access, and later compulsory schooling, education spread rapidly among all groups: males and females, young and old. Algeria made substantial progress in reducing illiteracy and ignorance, especially after independence, and education has become one of the most important value-based determinants of social status in modern society.

Another major cultural transformation concerns the evolving status of women. The widespread access of females to education—reaching even higher levels—along with their increasing participation in the labor market, has enabled Algerian women to broaden their horizons and aspirations and to achieve significant accomplishments. Women have entered diverse economic sectors, including light and heavy industries, services, administration, and major institutions and companies. They have also reached positions within legislative and executive bodies, holding ministerial and diplomatic posts and serving as members of parliament and national assemblies.

This emancipation—through education, economic participation, and civic engagement—has led to important social changes, particularly within the family and in fertility patterns. These include a reduction in family size, a sharp decline in fertility rates, delayed marriage, and the emergence of voluntary singlehood, all of which are characteristic features of modern society (Drid, 2009).

Moreover, women's participation in economic life outside the home has reduced their exclusive domestic role, which was once their primary sphere of activity. As a result, their capacity to care for elderly family members has diminished. Working women often find it difficult to meet all household demands while also fulfilling their responsibilities toward their husbands and children.

Consequently, family size and responsibilities tend to shrink, and women—often returning home exhausted from work—are less able to devote time to caregiving beyond their immediate nuclear family. This has led to a decline in the level of care provided to elderly individuals within the household, particularly in cases where relationships between the daughter-in-law and her husband's parents are strained. When the elderly are involved, such tensions can negatively affect their status, well-being, and the quality of care they receive within the family.

### **3 Section Four: Characteristics of the Development of the Algerian Family and Its Impact on the Status of the Elderly**

Specialists indicate that the development of the Algerian family has taken place within the broader framework of general development that society seeks to achieve in various dimensions—social, economic, and cultural. The Algerian family was not directly shaped by the rapid transformations observed in the economic and political spheres, particularly industrialization. Rather, its evolution occurred in a slower context

and functioned as a dependent variable influenced by these changes.

The aspiration toward modernization and urbanization did not completely eliminate traditional social relations within both urban and modern society. On the contrary, many customs and traditions remain preserved in Algerian society, such as neighborhood relations, cooperation, marriage practices, and especially respect for parents and the elderly.

The development of the Algerian family is characterized by several features, most notably the weakening of the domestic economic structure based on indivisibility and agnatic organization (*agnatique*), due to changes in its material and economic foundations. As previously noted, these changes weakened the traditional structure, leading to the emergence of a new socio-familial system that continuously reshapes itself through processes of deconstruction and reconstruction, as highlighted by Mustapha Boufnouchet (1982).

Furthermore, the evolution of the Algerian family did not prevent the continuation of social relations rooted in traditional rural structures, extending into urban society. Even in modern contexts, individuals remain attached to their circles of belonging, whether their village of origin, *douar*, tribe (*'arsh*), ancestry, or cultural and ethnological identity.

### **4 Section One: The Evolution of Patriarchy**

Transformations brought about by changes in the socio-economic environment have reduced the rigidity of patriarchy in the Algerian family, shifting it from coercive authority toward greater flexibility. The father, who once held absolute economic and legal decision-making power, has become more of a consulted advisor—sometimes his opinion is sought, and sometimes not.

The expansion of social and familial freedom has led fathers to relinquish their former authoritarian role as the sole decision-maker. However, they have adapted to the new family structure and its relational patterns, just as the family has adapted to them. Although fathers continue to enjoy respect and esteem within Algerian families, they no longer possess centralized authority over decision-making.

Despite this decline in authority and loss of many traditional functions, the father remains a central figure of family cohesion. He continues to care for and support family members and retains the responsibility of providing financial maintenance, even when family members are economically independent. He is still expected to ensure the needs and well-being of all members, sometimes without receiving direct support in return.

## **5 Section Two: The Evolution of Agnatic Relations (*Agnatique*)**

In contrast, the contemporary family has restored a certain balance within the conjugal

family system by strengthening affinal relations (*in-law relations*) and reducing the dominance of the paternal family. This shift is largely due to the independence of the nuclear family and its physical and social distance from the father's household, which has contributed to the development of maternal kinship relations in modern families.

Kinship relations have also expanded through stronger ties between families and the maternal lineage, particularly due to the improved social and professional status of women. In some cases, mothers provide both material and moral support, reinforcing their social position. At the same time, paternal kinship relations have become more democratic in structure.

Thus, the evolution of agnatic relations in the Algerian family has created a balance between paternal and maternal kinship systems (*relations of kinship and affinity*), reducing the dominance previously associated with the paternal side.

## **6 Section Three: The Evolution of the Undivided Family**

The undivided (extended) family system has also undergone transformation, marked by its gradual weakening and social and economic fragmentation. The emergence of independent and wage-based employment has contributed to the separation of the nuclear family from the extended family structure.

This separation is no longer driven by demographic pressure or large household size, but rather by the desire for a more private and independent lifestyle.

## 7 Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be stated that the elderly continue to maintain their social status within society due to the persistence of traditional social behaviors, despite the modern transformations that have taken place. Algerian society continues to preserve value-based norms that define the status of older individuals, deeply rooted in collective consciousness through religion, socialization, and inherited cultural traditions passed down through generations.

The status of the elderly within the family is based on two dimensions: their position as older individuals (elders) and their role as parents and holders of paternal authority. In both cases, this status enjoys significant symbolic capital within the value system and collective consciousness of Algerian society. As the study shows, most elderly individuals still maintain their status and enjoy positive and interactive relationships with family members, despite the decline in their functional roles and responsibilities.

New criteria of social status in modern society have not significantly diminished the authority of the elderly or the father; rather, they act as reinforcing factors that enhance their position. Socio-economic indicators—such as material well-being, high social standing, good health,

and higher educational attainment—serve as extensions of influence and power, enabling the elderly or the father to exercise authority on a broader scale. These factors also function as sources of respect and prestige, helping to preserve the elevated status they once held as the highest authority within the traditional family structure.

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