

The Organization of Gender Relations within the Algerian Family : A Socio-Anthropological Study in al-Darawish Village, Algeria

Dr. Benali Nacera

Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
University of Mustapha Stambouli, Mascara, Algeria
Member of the Laboratory of Social and Historical Research, Algeria
n.benali@univ-mascara.dz

Received: 22/06/2025 ; Accepted: 01/10/2025 ; Published: 14/04/2026

Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the features of socialization and to explore how gender difference is expressed within the family. These processes serve the social order, beginning with the group's representations of males and females. Such expressions appear through the persistence of certain rituals that regulate gender relations, such as rituals associated with the birth of a male child and the ritual of circumcision. The patriarchal family uses these rituals to construct masculinity. In this sense, the ritual becomes one of the mechanisms through which distinction between the sexes is produced. It can therefore be concluded that birth rituals constitute basic rules for organizing relations between the sexes. They draw boundaries and establish hierarchies that will later appear through functions, roles, and spaces.

Through our socio-anthropological study in al-Darawish Village, in the city of Mascara, Algeria, we seek to interpret women's representations in order to understand gender relations.

Keywords : gender; social representations; ritual; family; hierarchy between the sexes; woman.

First : Methodological Introduction

This article aims to investigate the role of the family in organizing gender relations through the representations of women in al-Darawish Village. Relations between men and women are still shaped by patriarchal culture through the mobilization of a set of mechanisms that preserve the social order. Our study is situated within a qualitative approach in order to understand the depth of meanings present in the field. For this reason, we adopted the socio-anthropological method to study the subject.

The research problem can be formulated as follows:

How do the mechanisms that regulate relations between men and women manifest themselves within the institution of the family?

The hypotheses were as follows: patriarchal culture influences the family by reproducing gender relations through the revival of a set of representations and rituals aimed at regulating relations between the sexes.

1. This is manifested in the continuity of the ritual surrounding the birth of a male child as one of the mechanisms of differentiation between the sexes.
2. A set of rules is applied within the family, such as obligation, submission, and modesty, in order to privilege one sex over the other.

The study population consisted of 17 elderly women from al-Darawish Village in the city of Mascara, Algeria. This field study was conducted from June 2024 to March 2025. We relied on direct observation and semi-structured interviews.

1. Definition of Concepts

A. Social Representations

The development of the concept of social representations is largely attributed to Émile Durkheim. He used the term “representation” within the social framework in order to highlight its specific character. He pointed out that representations are not the product of a few ideas that occupy the attention of certain individuals. Rather, they are remnants of our previous life, embodied in prejudgments, acquired habits, and our unconscious tendencies, that is, what are known as moral traits (Durkheim, 1967, p. 113).

B. Gender

This concept focuses on relations of power and on the differences between women and men, as well as the effects of these differences on social, economic, political, and cultural roles (Souad Youssef Nour al-Din, 2006, p. 25). Gender is also concerned with studying differences between the sexes on cultural and social grounds rather than on a biological basis. In other words, it addresses the social roles assigned to both sexes (Omayma Abu Bakr and Sherine Shoukry, 2002, p. 104).

C. Rituals

In Durkheimian theory, rituals are defined as a socio-affective support for society, les rites comme support socio-affectif. They are rules of conduct that show how human beings should comport themselves in relation to sacred things (Durkheim, 1912, p. 56).

Rituals also play an important role in protecting life through their repetition (Jeffrey, 1998, p. 57).

Secondly: The Algerian Family and the Reproduction of Gender Relations

Gender has become one of the major topics addressed by contemporary researchers, especially within feminist scholarship. It has been examined through a wide range of theories and research trends. These approaches have attracted the attention of modern states and contemporary societies, particularly alongside the emergence of human rights and citizenship. Gender is a relatively recent Anglo-Saxon concept. It is commonly referred to as Gender. It differs from the concept of sex. Sex is determined through the biological characteristics of the body and defines whether one is male or female according to the traits of masculinity and femininity. If biology and the social context are two distinct domains, masculinity and femininity also carry the idea of unequal power relations between men and women (Bereni, Chauvin, Jaunait, & Revillard, 2008, p. 16).

Relations between men and women in Algerian society have historically been shaped by distinction and differentiation between the sexes, especially before independence. After independence, however, women’s participation in the war of liberation alongside men gave them a role in the national development project. This role appeared through educating their daughters and demanding their entry into the labor market. Their greatest challenge extended beyond colonialism to customs and traditions, which made women dependent beings subject to the patriarchal order. As a result, the identities of both men and women took multiple forms.

Despite the social, economic, and even political transformations experienced by the country, the conditions of men and women have changed only at a superficial level. In most cases, the aspiration for partnership within the family remains absent and neglected.

From this, we may conclude that there are common features across generations in the roles and conditions of men and women. The family has played a central role in institutionalizing the foundations of patriarchy through a set of rituals that preserve the continuity of gender hierarchy. Woman was traditionally associated with domestic labor, domestic life, and the household space, as well as with motherhood and fertility. Yet today she has entered a state of crisis (Oussadik, 2012, p. 86).

On this basis, the organization of relations between men and women can be understood as a social product shaped by the family through the process of socialization. Despite the transformations that have affected women's status, male authority remains firmly established. Most of the women grew up in extended families. For this reason, a strong bond with the extended family still persists. The representations expressed by the women of al-Darawish Village largely agree on the superiority of the male over the female. Whatever a woman's way of life may be, and whatever her cultural level or social background, their representations appear largely similar. In their view, a son is preferable to a daughter. By extension, the man is considered better than the woman. This is justified, in their representations, by both the social view and the religious view. Women therefore continue to endorse patriarchal authority and religious authority. At the same time, some respondents challenged this view and stated that there is no difference between male and female, especially in light of women's success in education. One respondent told us: "Today, women study and become educated. There is no difference between men and women. But in people's attitudes, the man is always seen as better than the woman."

According to the representations of the women of al-Darawish, patriarchal culture is the main source of gender discrimination. In the accounts of many respondents, the words "people," "society," and "religion" were repeatedly mentioned. The family therefore seeks to act according to the accepted rules of society. Every family has its own status and its own inviolability, embodied in the protected domestic sphere of women.

Third: Family-Related Rituals as a Mechanism for Regulating and Defining Relations Between the Sexes

1. Birth Rituals as a Mechanism for Differentiation Between the Sexes

The preference for male offspring is rooted primarily in the belief that the male child ensures the continuity of the family name. For this reason, the process of preference begins even before marriage. It is treated as a planned and carefully considered project within the patriarchal family. This begins with the selection of the proper vessel through which the child will be formed, namely, the appropriate wife. After marriage, women may also resort to certain rituals in the hope that the pregnancy will result in a boy. It may therefore be concluded that the patriarchal family plays a major role in gendered socialization. It works to shape the boy and ground his status in a set of beliefs that elevate his value and reinforce the prevailing system of values. His birth is welcomed with ululations and great joy. The father rejoices at the arrival of a son because the boy will carry his name after his death. For this reason, various celebrations

are held upon the birth of a boy. By contrast, such celebrations are almost absent when the newborn is a girl.

Most families are careful to hold feasts and lawful celebratory meals when a boy is born. In such occasions, animals are slaughtered in what is known as the 'aqiqah ceremony. In a field study on infant weaning, Soumaya Naamane Guessous observed that from the very beginning a male infant may be breastfed for several months longer than his sister simply because he is male and is believed to need greater strength. Many women therefore breastfeed their sons for a few months longer than their daughters. This practice follows the traditional belief that a boy should be breastfed until he reaches two years and one month, whereas a girl's breastfeeding period should end two months earlier (Naamane Guessous, 2011, p. 20).

According to popular belief, when a woman is pregnant with a boy, her face becomes more beautiful. By contrast, pregnancy with a girl is seen as burdensome and as altering the mother's appearance.

One of the respondents explained to us the link, in patriarchal family representations, between the criteria for choosing a woman and the desire to secure a future male child. She stated:

"In the past, they wanted the woman to be plump and fair-skinned. Why? Because if she was plump, she could work in the house, endure hardship, do cleaning, sifting, and everything else, not fall ill, and be able to bear children."

Thus, both in the past and up to the present day, a woman has been chosen as a wife according to her social standing, that is, her social origin, as well as her physical features, in the hope of producing a son who is healthy, physically sound, and free from defects, and who can also take pride in the lineage of his maternal uncles.

Accordingly, the concern to obtain a healthy and proper son explains the anxiety that has long dominated the group. This anxiety has led to strictness in the selection of the woman deemed suitable for bearing a son. It has also led to warnings directed at men against the consequences of placing desire where it does not belong.

Immediately after natural birth, social birth emerges from culture through a set of rituals. These rituals constitute one of the mechanisms through which the child is integrated into society. They also serve as a means of regulating relations among people and of maintaining the order of the universe. Society therefore defines individual belonging according to the marker of sex, whether male or female. The child is not born with prior awareness of sexual difference. Rather, this awareness is formed gradually and across the stages of the life cycle. Masculinity is therefore a social construction produced through a set of rituals and ceremonial practices, such as the 'aqiqah, ear piercing, and circumcision.

In Kabyle society, a male newborn is subjected to the ritual of burying the placental or umbilical remains in the earth. These remains are preserved until the child reaches the age of three or four. His father then accompanies him, cuts the remains into seven pieces, and gives them to the young boy so that he may bury them, usually in the garden of the house or a similar place. This is done with the intention of ensuring the presence of seven brothers, according to their beliefs, and because the male is the one who carries and preserves the family name.

If the newborn is female, the ritual changes. The remains are not buried. Instead, they are thrown onto the roof of the house so that birds may take them away when the girl reaches marriageable age (Devulder, 1957, p. 351). The function of this practice, as a rite of passage,

is to indicate from the moment of the girl's arrival that her place is unstable and temporary. As the local saying goes: "A girl's place is empty; however long she stays, she will leave." No matter how long she remains in her family home, she is expected to depart, and her permanent place is considered to be her husband's house.

From the above, it is clear that such practices contribute to the renewal and revival of social representations. They operate through mediation with the sacred and through reconciliation with supernatural forces. In doing so, they participate in the production of meaning and value for both persons and things. Ritual thus consolidates the important principles of life. It enables the individual to participate in the collective order and contributes to the shaping of a personality rooted in the memory of the group. As a respected practice, ritual also encourages the performance of good deeds (Rivière, 1997, p. 85).

2. Rituals of Visibility and Concealment Between the Sexes

Patriarchal culture has constructed the principles of honor through the protection of female virginity. On this basis, a ritual known as **al-ribāt** has been employed. It performs a protective function, fonction sécurisante. It shields members of the patriarchal family from anxiety and gives them a sense of security. At the same time, however, it has a psychological effect, since it generates in the bound girl a feeling of danger and insecurity.

It should be noted that the ritual of al-ribāt imposed on girls is essentially a reaction to dangers and threats. The first function of any ritual practice lies in regulating prohibitions (Jeffrey, 1998, p. 66).

From another perspective, this ritual also produces a dynamic force, fonction dynamogénique. It carries within it an energy directed toward the achievement of its aims and the fulfillment of unconscious desires (Rivière, 1997, p. 86). In this way, the girl is expected to preserve herself. The woman's body thus becomes protected as a legitimate prize through which symbolic capital is exchanged between families shaped by patriarchal culture (Eaubonne & Sebbar, 1995, p. 215).

3. Rules Applied within the Patriarchal Family as a Mechanism of Differentiation Between the Sexes

Among the rules enforced within the patriarchal family as a mechanism of differentiation between the sexes are moral rules and rules of conduct. These rules are applied as an organized series of social practices endorsed by patriarchal culture in order to sustain the social order.

First, there are rules of obligation. The woman is required to obey the commands and prohibitions issued by the family. Obedience therefore became one of the pillars upon which femininity was founded.

As for the man, he is associated with the protection of his honor and family dignity. This is regarded as a binding duty, and one that comes at a cost (Cassar, 2005, p. 77). The man is thus expected to protect those under his authority through a system of surveillance and punishment. We may then speak of rules of modesty. Socialization works to preserve honor, which is one of the principles and values instilled within the patriarchal family. Members of the group are required to uphold and protect it. Honor is linked to the standing and property of the father, the brother, the clan, and the tribe (Eaubonne & Sebbar, 1995, p. 216).

Because modesty is considered of great importance, the woman remains in a lower position than the man, whether in relation to her father, her brother, or even her husband, and also in

relation to the outside world. Only the world of the harim remains a closed world (Eaubonne & Sebbar, 1995, p. 20). A woman's honor is therefore viewed as the center of family honor, and her reputation is treated as a social value. Here again, both men and women regard it as an important cultural feature of the societies of the Middle East and North Africa. This also accords with the representations common to Mediterranean societies, where family honor is tied to female virginity (Cassar, 2005, p. 80).

In this way, control is exercised over the movement of the female body through the imposition of a set of rules. These include codes of dress, rules of sitting, and the regulation of the movements and speech of the female body.

Accordingly, the woman learns from an early age how to deal with her body. This includes how to bend her posture, how to sit, and how to walk. The mother works hard to convey the idea that the girl should not play with boys, should not mix with them, and should not trust men whatever the degree of kinship. Correction: must translate Arabic phrase. Let's continue cleanly.

The mother works hard to convey the idea that the girl should not play with boys, should not mix with them, and should not trust men, regardless of the degree of kinship. One of the respondents explained to us how her family and brothers rejected boyish behavior that resembled that of the opposite sex. She was raised from an early age on the basis of distinction so that she would become a woman in the future. In her words: "I learned from an early age that there were limits to my speech and my behavior so that I could become a woman."

Another respondent added: "My mother always warned me about the consequences of mixing with boys. They used to tell me: if a man even touches you, you will end up pregnant." In other words, they believed that the mere touch of a man's hand could make a girl pregnant.

From this, the girl learns how to preserve herself, since she represents family capital and family inheritance. She is not permitted to establish a relationship with a man outside marriage, because otherwise she would face death at the hands of her father and brothers (Charnay, 1965, p. 27).

In a patriarchal society, a man's gaze directed at a woman is considered natural and innocent. If a woman feels discomfort because of a man's stare, she may turn her face in another direction or reduce eye contact to a minimum in order to avoid further unease. By contrast, when a woman looks at a man in the same way, this is interpreted, according to the standards of that society, as a sexual signal. Such cases may not carry major significance when considered separately. Yet at the collective level, they reinforce patterns of gendered social domination (Giddens, trans. Fayez al-Sabbagh, 2005, p. 164).

Finally, it is necessary to refer to rules of prohibition. Through these rules, the patriarchal family rejects the mixing of men and women. As a result, social space and domestic space are divided along gender lines. There is a space for women, linked to the private sphere, while the world of men is associated with the public sphere.

The house is defined as *al-hurma*, that is, the inviolable domain of the man. No outsider has the right to see the women of the household. For this reason, men have used mechanisms of concealment and seclusion in order to protect their possessions from strangers. In the past, the entrance of the family house did not open directly onto the courtyard so that outsiders could not see what was inside the home. When strangers arrived, one of the men of the family would

receive them at the entrance after clearing the way with the word “the way.” Today, the phenomenon of shielding houses and apartments with iron window grilles and covering them with curtains from the outside is evidence of the continuing organization of gender relations. It should also be noted how strongly the patriarchal society rejects and disapproves of women going out into public space. Even standing at the door of her own house is not accepted for the women of the household in the same way that it is for men. Nor is she allowed to receive all male visitors.

All this allows the man to appropriate all spaces. He is the one who distributes roles and determines the space within which the female body may move. At the same time, restrictions on the female body become more severe through the strict definition of its position and the ways in which it may appear. This process begins within the family, then extends to other institutions. The street remains the link connecting these different spaces.

Conclusion

The persistence of certain rituals that regulate gender relations functions as one of the mechanisms through which the social order is preserved. Among these rituals are those associated with the birth of a male child. This is a ritual marked by visibility and public expression. It plays a role in changing and redefining status, especially through ensuring the continuity of the family name. Circumcision, by contrast, is used by the patriarchal family as a means of constructing masculinity. From this, one may identify the role and functions of these rituals: they draw boundaries between men and women and establish hierarchy.

References

- Abu Bakr, Omayma, and Shirin Shukri. 2002. *Women and Gender: Cultural and Social Discrimination Between the Sexes*. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr al-Mu‘asir, 1st ed.
- Bereni, Laure, Sébastien Chauvin, Alexandre Jaunait, and Anne Revillard. 2008. *Introduction aux Gender Studies: Manuel des études sur le genre*. Brussels: De Boeck Université.
- Cassar, Carmel. 2005. *L’honneur et la honte en Méditerranée*. Paris: Edusid. d’Eaubonne, Françoise, and Leïla Sebbar. 1998. “Les femmes du Maghreb,” pp. 207–217, in [incomplete reference in original source].
- Dayres, Michèle. 1995. *Femmes et violences dans le monde*. Paris: Éditions L’Harmattan.
- Devulder, M. 1957. “Rituel magique des femmes kabyles.” *Revue Africaine* 101: 299–362. Algiers: Office des Publications Universitaires.
- Durkheim, Émile. 1912/1990. *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*.
- Durkheim, Émile. 1967. *Sociologie et philosophie*. Paris: PUF.
- Giddens, Anthony. 2005. *Sociology*. Translated by Fayez al-Sabbagh. Arab Center for Unity Studies, 4th ed.
- Guessous, Soumaya Naamane. 2011. *Without Shame: Female Sexuality in Morocco*. Translated by Abdel Rahim Hazal. Casablanca: Arab Cultural Center, 2nd ed.
- Jeffrey, Denis. *Jouissance du sacré: religion et post-modernité*. Paris: Éditions Armand Colin. [Year not clearly stated in the source provided.]

- Oussedik, Fatima. 2012. "La problématique de la post-colonie et l'analyse des rapports de genre en Algérie," pp. 81–98, in Nouria Benghabrit Remaoun and Belkacem Benzenine, Centre de Recherche en Anthropologie Sociale et Culturelle.
- Qarami, Amal. 2007. *Difference in Arab-Islamic Culture: A Gender Study*. Beirut: Dar al-Madar al-Islami, 1st ed.
- Rivière, Claude. 1997. *Socio-anthropologie des religions*. Paris: Éditions Armand Colin.
- Youssef Nour al-Din, Souad. 2006. *Arab Women in Parliament: Gender Empowerment*. Dar al-Nahda al-'Arabiyya.