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Masculinity, Femininity, and the Social Imaginary in Algeria: An Ethnographic Study in the Tebessa Region

Abstract

This article examines conceptions of masculinity and femininity within the social imaginary of the Algerian region of Tebessa, conceived as a cultural space rich in symbolic interactions and intersecting gendered identities. It is grounded in a central research problem: how these conceptions are formed within specific historical and cultural contexts. Masculinity and femininity are approached as symbolic systems that transcend biological classifications, reflecting instead complex social structures that regulate relations between individuals and groups. The study adopts a field-based ethnographic methodology, employing participant observation and in-depth interviews with local inhabitants, thereby enabling a nuanced understanding of the social and symbolic dynamics that shape gender roles. It further addresses the influence of historical, economic, and cultural factors on these conceptions, with particular emphasis on the role of socialisation, rituals, and religious and traditional discourses in the intergenerational reproduction of gender identities. The findings reveal the existence of a pronounced gender hierarchy in which masculinity is associated with strength, authority, and the capacity to provide. At the same time, femininity is constructed around values of obedience, modesty, and care. Although these conceptions continue to exert a strong influence, they are increasingly challenged by ongoing social and economic transformations, including rising levels of education, migration, and changes in family structure. The study also highlights emerging forms of negotiation around gender identity, as young men and women seek to redefine their roles in a changing social context, despite persistent cultural pressures and strong conservative attachments to tradition. In this context, the study contributes to enriching anthropological debates on identity dynamics in borderland societies, offering a framework for understanding gender transformations in traditional communities in the context of globalisation and rapid economic change.

Keywords: *masculinity, femininity, social imaginary, anthropology, gender identity*

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Əlcəzairdə kişilik, qadınlıq və sosial təxəyyül: Tebessa bölgəsində etnoqrafik tədqiqat

Xülasə

Bu məqalə, simvolik qarşılıqlı təsirlərlə və kəsişən gender kimlikləri ilə zəngin bir mədəni məkan kimi təsəvvür edilən Əlcəzair Tebessa bölgəsinin sosial təxəyyülü daxilində kişilik və qadınlıq anlayışlarını araşdırır. Məqalə, mərkəzi bir tədqiqat probleminə əsaslanır: bu anlayışların müəyyən tarixi və mədəni kontekstlərdə necə formalaşması. Kişilik və qadınlıq, bioloji təsnifatları aşan, fərdlər və qruplar arasındakı münasibətləri tənzimləyən mürəkkəb sosial strukturları əks etdirən simvolik sistemlər kimi qəbul edilir. Tədqiqat, iştirakçı müşahidəsindən və yerli sakinlərlə dərin müsahibələrdən istifadə edərək sahə əsaslı etnoqrafik metodologiyayı tətbiq edir və bununla da gender rollarını formalaşdıran sosial və simvolik dinamikaların incə anlaşılmasına imkan yaradır. Bu tədqiqat, tarixi, iqtisadi və mədəni amillərin bu anlayışlara təsirini, xüsusən də sosiallaşmanın, ritualların, dini və ənənəvi müzakirələrin gender kimliklərinin nəsillərarası bərpasında roluna vurğu etməklə yanaşı, araşdırır. Tapıntılar, kişiliyin güc, səlahiyyət və təmin etmək qabiliyyəti ilə əlaqəli olduğu açıq bir gender iyerarxiyasının mövcudluğunu ortaya qoyur. Eyni zamanda, qadınlıq itaətkarlıq, təvazökarlıq və qayğı dəyərləri ətrafında qurulur. Bu anlayışlar güclü təsir göstərməyə davam etsə də, təhsil səviyyəsinin yüksəlməsi, miqrasiya və ailə strukturundakı dəyişikliklər daxil olmaqla, davam edən sosial və iqtisadi transformasiyalar tərəfindən getdikcə daha çox çətinlik çəkir. Tədqiqat, həmçinin gənc kişilər və qadınlar davamlı mədəni təzyiqlərə və ənənəyə güclü mühafizəkar bağlılıqlara baxmayaraq, dəyişən sosial kontekstdə rollarını yenidən müəyyənləşdirməyə çalışdıqları üçün gender kimliyi ətrafında yeni danışıqlar formalarını da vurğulayır. Bu kontekstdə, tədqiqat sərhədyanı cəmiyyətlərdə kimlik dinamikası ilə bağlı antropoloji müzakirələri zənginləşdirməyə töhfə verir və qloballaşma və sürətli iqtisadi dəyişiklik kontekstində ənənəvi icmalarda gender transformasiyalarını anlamaq üçün bir çərçivə təqdim edir.

Açar sözlər: kişilik, qadınlıq, sosial təxəyyül, antropologiya, gender kimliyi

Introduction

Conceptions of masculinity and femininity in societies constitute one of the principal keys to understanding systems of cultural values and mechanisms of social organisation, given the symbolic meanings they carry, which touch upon the very core of individual and collective identity. These conceptions do not merely express socially imposed gendered roles; instead, they represent mental and imaginary structures produced within specific cultural and historical contexts and reformulated through everyday practices and dominant discourses. From this perspective, the study of such conceptions within Algerian society is particularly important, especially in light of the profound social, economic, and cultural transformations that Algeria has experienced in recent decades. Algerian society is characterised by oscillation and interpenetration among multiple value systems of diverse origins and orientations. Some are deeply rooted in the local traditional heritage associated with customs, traditions, and tribal structures; others stem from conservative religious frameworks that exert a strong influence on gender conceptions; alongside a third system derived from the values of modernity and globalisation, with their calls for equality, freedom, and the dismantling of gendered domination.

Within this context, the Tebessa region emerges as a particularly compelling case study, as it represents a cultural space marked by pronounced specificity resulting from its geographical position as a border region between Algeria and Tunisia. This location has endowed it with a dual character, combining cultural interaction and openness on the one hand and a strong attachment to local particularity on the other hand. The border position has rendered Tebessa a site of cultural interpenetration and social exchange over centuries, bearing witness to complex dynamics between identities and affiliations, as well as between traditional reference frameworks and modern transformations. In this sense, Tebessa constitutes a natural laboratory for observing interactions

between the local and the transboundary and between the traditional and the contemporary, thereby granting it considerable anthropological depth for analysing transformations in gender conceptions.

Research

Representations of masculinity and femininity within the social imaginary do not merely reflect the biological classifications of individuals by sex; instead, they constitute complex systems of meanings, symbols, and cultural significations through which social relations are reproduced and through which individual identities and roles within the group are shaped. These conceptions are constructed through mechanisms of socialisation and consolidated through rituals, religious discourses, traditions, and popular proverbs, all of which function as expressive tools that both preserve and reproduce the gender order. The central problem lies in attempting to understand these symbolic structures that underpin gender identities within their specific cultural and social contexts and in exploring the tensions and contradictions that emerge as a result of contemporary transformations, such as the expansion of education, changes in family relations, the development of digital media, and rural as well as cross-border migration.

This article seeks to address the following question:

How are conceptions of masculinity and femininity formed within the social imaginary of the Algerian Tebessa region?

1.1. Objectives and Significance of the Study

This study aims to analyse representations of masculinity and femininity within the social imaginary of the inhabitants of the Tebessa region by examining how these representations are formed and transmitted across generations through socialisation and cultural mediation. It focuses on the dynamics of gender roles in light of the interaction between traditional cultural structures and contemporary sociocultural transformations. It seeks to explore the mechanisms of negotiation and resistance through which individuals and groups redefine their gender identities within a society characterised by change and plurality.

This study is of considerable theoretical importance, as it seeks to offer a scholarly contribution to understanding the cultural specificity of gender conceptions in Algerian society by approaching the social imaginary as an analytical entry point for examining identities and symbolic interactions. It is also marked by methodological significance, as it adopts a field-based anthropological approach grounded in participant observation and in-depth interviews, thereby enabling the production of knowledge that is closely connected to lived reality and attentive to local contexts. In terms of practical value, the study provides field data that may inform the development of policies and programs that incorporate the gender dimension in a border region with distinct cultural and social characteristics, such as Tebessa, where traditional norms largely govern gender roles. The principal scholarly contribution of this study lies in addressing the knowledge gap that characterises Algerian anthropological research on border regions by shedding light on the mechanisms through which gender identity is formed in a space marked by the interpenetration of the local and the transboundary and of the traditional and the modern.

2.1. Scope and Limitations of the Study

The scope of this study is confined to specific temporal, spatial, thematic, and human parameters. Temporally, it is limited to the period from January 2024--April 2025, which corresponds to the field data collection phase; consequently, its findings reflect this timeframe without tracing broader historical transformations. Spatially, the study is limited to the Algerian Tebessa region in its various localities (Tebessa, Cheria, El Ouenza, and Bir El Ater). Thematically, it focuses on conceptions of masculinity and femininity within the social imaginary, deliberately excluding other gender-related issues such as gender-based violence or public policies on equality. In human terms, the study is restricted to a purposive sample of 24 participants of varying ages and educational and occupational backgrounds and does not claim to represent all segments of the local community. Methodologically, it is further delimited by its reliance on a qualitative approach, which prioritises depth of understanding over the production of statistical generalisations.

2. Research Methodology

This field-based anthropological study seeks to understand and analyse conceptions of masculinity and femininity within the Algerian social imaginary, with a particular focus on the Tebessa region as a geographical and cultural space rich in social and symbolic diversity. The ethnographic method was selected as the principal framework for the study (Bount & Izar, 2011), given its capacity to provide an in-depth understanding of social interactions within their natural contexts, allowing the researcher to participate in the daily lives of individuals and to observe patterns of behaviour and cultural symbols that shape conceptions of masculinity and femininity. In this context, efforts were directed at building trust with participants, which facilitated deep interaction and enabled access to the details of their everyday lives, including rituals, customs, and conversations imbued with gendered meanings. This practical approach contributes to documenting and interpreting social patterns that reflect deeply embedded gender conceptions in the local culture of Tebessa.

In addition to the ethnographic approach, an analytical method was employed to ensure rigorous interpretation of the field data. This method aims to analyse ethnographic material, whether textual data derived from interviews or field notes, by deconstructing gendered representations and analysing their cultural symbols while linking individuals' perceptions to the broader social contexts that shape them (Ibrahim & Al-Shanwani, 1988). This integration of descriptive and analytical approaches enables a deeper understanding of the multiple dimensions of the social imaginary in the Tebessa region, where cultural, social, and historical factors intersect in shaping gender conceptions.

The study relied on a range of data collection tools, including in-depth interviews and participant observation (Al-Jawad, 2011). In-depth interviews were particularly effective for exploring personal perceptions of masculinity and femininity, with an emphasis on gender roles as understood within Tebessa's cultural and social context. These interviews addressed recent social transformations and their impact on such perceptions. Participant observation was conducted through direct interaction with individuals in their natural environments, such as homes, markets, and social gatherings, which facilitated the identification of social patterns that may not be revealed through interviews alone, including implicit behaviours and everyday practices.

Informants were also employed as a complementary source of data. In this context, informants refer to individuals with extensive knowledge of local culture or long-standing experience in areas relevant to the study, whether through their social positions or professional expertise (Ibrahim & Al-Shanwani, 1988). Informants provided in-depth insights into the cultural and historical backgrounds related to conceptions of masculinity and femininity in Tebessa, as well as interpretations of certain customs and practices that might otherwise appear obscure. Their role was also crucial in facilitating access to additional participants and enhancing the understanding of nuanced local contexts.

Ethnographic documents constituted an additional important source utilised in this study. These documents included local cultural texts such as folk tales, proverbs, and songs, as well as historical records and written documents reflecting gender roles in the Tebessa region across different periods. These materials contributed an additional temporal dimension to the study by enabling analysis of the evolution of conceptions of masculinity and femininity within the social imaginary across generations, thereby enriching the research's analytical and cognitive depth.

Purposive sampling was adopted to ensure a broad representation of the studied community in the Tebessa region. The sample comprised 24 male and female participants representing diverse age groups and social and occupational backgrounds. The participants were selected to include both rural and urban contexts, ensuring the exploration of gender conceptions across various social and cultural settings. The sampling strategy focused on individuals able to provide in-depth information about the social imaginary associated with masculinity and femininity while ensuring methodological saturation through the recurrence of patterns and themes across the collected data.

The study concluded with 24 participants after methodological saturation was confirmed, as newly collected data no longer yielded novel insights or representations. To ensure scientific rigour, all collected data were meticulously documented, and interviews and field notes were reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy and consistency while relying on a qualitative methodology aligned with the study's objectives. This integration of ethnographic and analytical approaches, together with

the use of precise data-collection tools such as in-depth interviews and participant observation, enhances the credibility of the findings and contributes to a comprehensive portrayal of conceptions of masculinity and femininity within the social imaginary of the Tebessa region.

1. Results

1.3. Conceptions of Masculinity in the Social Imaginary

1.3.1. Characteristics and Attributes Associated with Masculinity in the Local Imaginary

The field study reveals that masculinity within the social imaginary of the Tebessa region is understood as a system of values and behaviours attributed to men, centred on physical strength, emotional restraint, and the capacity to provide. These attributes correspond to what Raewyn Connell (1995) described as "hegemonic masculinity," which constitutes a normative model continuously reproduced within society through institutionalised social discourse that compels men to conform to be recognised as men.

Expressions such as "a man must stay up thinking about how to provide food for his family" encapsulate this conception, whereby manhood is reduced to an economic and symbolic function that reproduces relations of social domination. According to Pierre Bourdieu (2009), masculinity in this context serves as an instrument of symbolic domination, as the "real man" is granted privileged status on the basis of his capacity to assume responsibility and exercise dominance in both the private and public spheres.

However, despite its historical continuity, this conception has begun to face tensions in light of rising unemployment and precariousness, which have weakened many men's ability to fulfil this model. This has led to feelings of decline and inadequacy, resulting in a form of marginalisation of masculinities unable to align with the dominant model.

1.3.2. Pathways of Masculine Identity Formation and Rites of Manhood

Field observations indicate that the construction of masculine identity is not merely a biological accumulation or an age-related stage but rather a social trajectory filled with trials. This trajectory begins in childhood through observation and imitation. It is subsequently reinforced through implicit rites, such as assuming financial responsibilities, participating in family decision-making, and attending social events (weddings, funerals) in which men demonstrate their capacity for "endurance" and "wisdom."

One young participant stated that "manhood becomes evident when your family calls on you in times of trouble and finds you standing by them in it, or even your friends and neighbours," indicating that masculinity is forged in crisis and other situations. Likewise, specific rites of passage, such as entering the labour market or marriage, are regarded as fundamental markers of the transition from the status of a "boy" to that of a "man."

1.3.3. Classifications of Masculinity and Hierarchies among Different Forms of Manhood

The interviews indicate a subtle hierarchy within the local social imaginary among different "forms" of masculinity. Greater respect is accorded to the married man who provides for his family and is known for good conduct and moral uprightness, whereas the unmarried, the unemployed, or those who fail to assume their responsibilities are perceived as incomplete or unfinished men. One elderly participant explained, "There are men, and there are merely males... a man is the one who stands firm, provides, and protects his household," pointing to a precise binary classification between "true" masculinity and "deficient" masculinity. This distinction is continually reproduced through everyday discourse and symbolic representations within the community.

1.3.4. Discourses on Masculinity in the Region

In the Tebessa region, several discourses intersect to frame masculinity, most notably religious, traditional, and modernist discourses. Religious discourse positions the man as the family's moral and material guardian, emphasising attributes such as wisdom, justice, and self-restraint. Traditional discourse, in turn, reproduces the image of the strong man who is capable of controlling circumstances and safeguarding family honour.

In contrast, a modernist discourse, embraced by some young men, seeks to redefine manhood through new concepts such as emotional engagement, psychological support, and the sharing of

responsibilities with one's wife. As one young participant stated, "A man today has to be aware, to listen, not just to impose." This reflects a partial shift towards a more flexible model of masculinity.

1.3.5. Practices Reinforcing Masculine Identity across Different Social Spheres

Within the family sphere, masculinity continues to be expressed through traditional roles such as decision-making and economic provision. Nevertheless, certain cases reveal gradual changes, as some fathers speak of supporting their daughters' education and involving them in decision-making processes, indicating a renegotiation of the meanings of masculinity.

In the public sphere, masculinity manifests itself through everyday interactions in cafés, markets, and public events, where men are expected to be present, assertive, and at times speak on behalf of their families. In the workplace, masculinity is associated primarily with competence, diligence, and commitment.

1.3.6. Testimonies and Narratives on Experiences of Masculine Identity Formation

Several testimonies reveal personal experiences marked by challenges and inner conflicts. One worker in his thirties described his journey from unemployment to occupational stability as follows: "I felt incomplete; I could not even face my family... when I started working, I felt I was standing on my feet again. When you are unemployed, you feel deficient and incapable." This narrative encapsulates the strong association between masculinity and economic independence, as well as the profound impact of unemployment on feelings of dignity and identity.

Overall, the findings of the field study in the Tebessa region reflect the plurality and complexity of representations of masculinity. While specific traditional values remain dominant, tangible transformations are evident that seek to challenge the stereotypical images of men. This transformation does not unfold smoothly; instead, it is accompanied by internal and social tensions and conflicts, revealing an ongoing process of reconfiguring masculinity in light of economic, cultural, and demographic changes.

2.3. Conceptions of Femininity in the Social Imaginary

2.3.1. Characteristics and Attributes Associated with Femininity in the Local Imaginary

Field data indicate that femininity, within the social imaginary of the inhabitants of the Tebessa region, is not understood solely as a biological structure but rather as a set of moral and behavioural contents that consolidate the image of the modest, obedient woman devoted to her family. Femininity is manifested through modesty and social discipline and is closely associated with what is locally termed *satr* (propriety and concealment). As one housewife in her forties stated, "A woman must remain respectable, not go out without reason, not speak excessively; she must protect her husband and her household, preserve them, and please God above all else."

This conception aligns with Sarah Jamil's (2002) definition of femininity as "a set of rules governing women's behaviour and appearance," indicating that femininity is not a natural given but a social construction regulated by a precise system of norms. Similarly, Abdullah Al-Ghadhami (2006) argues that "femininity represents a mental conception exercised upon the female body," whereby women become objects of symbolic and social regulation within collective consciousness.

In this sense, femininity appears to be a socially conditioned function that is dependent on collective judgment and is continuously evaluated through women's conduct in both the public and private spheres. These attributes are reinforced through socialisation, popular proverbs, and familial discourse, rendering femininity "visible" through women's adherence to these prescribed qualities.

2.3.2. Pathways of Feminine Identity Construction and Rites of Passage

The construction of feminine identity within the local Tebessa community follows a prolonged trajectory of rites of passage beginning at puberty, during which girls' bodily and verbal behaviours are closely regulated and often culminate in marriage and motherhood. These rites include preparing girls to assume roles of service and care. As one mother testified, "A woman brings honour to her father, her brother, and her husband... a woman belongs to her husband's household, and from a young age, she must be raised with this understanding so that she becomes a virtuous mother who pleases God, her husband, and her family."

This conception reflects what Simone de Beauvoir (1949) asserted in *The Second Sex*, namely, that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," meaning that femininity is socially constructed

through a set of expectations and constraints imposed on girls from an early age and reproduced by local culture.

These rites manifest through the monitoring of dress, the division of labour within the family, and modes of interaction with outsiders. They are not merely practices but also mechanisms through which girls are socialised to become “respectable women” in accordance with communal norms and moral values.

2.3.3. Classifications of Femininity and Hierarchies Among Different Forms of Femininity

The interviews reveal an implicit hierarchy among different “types” of femininity. Women characterised by modesty, calmness, and practical household management are accorded high social status. In contrast, working or independent women may be viewed with suspicion at times, despite widespread recognition of their competence. One young woman stated, “Femininity does not mean weakness; it means strength and freedom,” reflecting the emergence of an alternative model that redefines femininity through independence and self-realisation.

This division generates latent conflicts within society and between generations, as traditional and emerging models engage in a symbolic struggle over the meaning of the “complete woman.”

2.3.4. Discourses on Femininity in the Region

Femininity is not merely an internal social construction but also the product of the intersection of multiple discourses that continuously reproduce it. Local religious discourse emphasises values of purity and chastity, framing femininity within a sphere of moral discipline. Traditional discourse, in turn, focuses on women’s roles as wives, mothers, and household caretakers.

Conversely, modernist discourse shaped by education, migration, and the media seeks to offer an alternative vision of women as active citizens capable of work and participation. One female university student described this shift as follows: “I want to live independently, to make decisions about my life, not always be afraid of what people will say.”

2.3.5. Practices Reinforcing Feminine Identity Across Different Social Spheres

In everyday life, femininity is manifested through routine social practices such as cooking, childcare, and household organisation, which remain primarily associated with women. Nevertheless, field observations also indicate women’s increasing involvement in other domains, such as education, healthcare, and commerce, which has expanded the possibilities for representing femininity beyond the domestic sphere.

In one testimony, a teacher in her thirties stated, “I work and my husband works, and each of us helps at home.” This practice reflects a form of role redistribution within the family and contributes to the reconstruction of a new feminine identity in which tradition intersects with modernisation.

3.2. Social Spaces and the Manifestations of Gendered Identities

Field interviews reveal that social spaces in the Tebessa region are not merely sites of use but are gender-conditioned spaces through which the community exercises its authority over individuals by defining “where men should be” and “where women should be.” In this sense, social space becomes a field of symbolic struggle in which gender representations are consolidated and behaviours regulated.

Public space is traditionally attributed to men. Cafés, mosques, markets, and neighbourhood squares all constitute arenas in which masculine dominance is reproduced daily. One participant in his fifties expressed this rigid distribution by stating, “The café here is only for men,” a remark that reinforces a conception of the public sphere as a domain of dialogue, control, and legitimate male presence to the exclusion of women.

Within these spaces, men do not merely exercise the right to presence; they also monopolise discursive tools and symbolic control over the places where they speak, analyse, and evaluate, whereas women, should they enter these spaces, are marginalised or subjected to social surveillance.

In contrast, private spaces such as homes, public baths, and certain women’s gatherings are considered the “natural places” of women, where care, upbringing, and service are performed. One woman expressed this by stating, “A woman must remain respectable and not go out too much,” a phrase that refers not only to spatial distribution but also to a moral conception of femininity associated with discipline and modesty.

However, social spaces are not static. Testimonies and observations indicate the emergence of shared spaces, such as universities, educational institutions, and modern commercial centres, that are now providing women with opportunities for presence, interaction, and renegotiation of gender boundaries. One female university student stated, "I want to go out, study, work... I should not confine myself between four walls," reflecting the beginnings of a transformation in feminine consciousness and a growing willingness to challenge symbolic boundaries.

Despite this openness, women in these shared spaces continue to experience indirect forms of surveillance exercised by society through looks, comments, or "what people say," rendering entry into public space a negotiated act fraught with risk.

From an anthropological perspective, the symbolism of space is linked to the collective imaginary: public space equals dominance, decision-making, and authority; private space equals care, modesty, and obedience. This symbolism does not merely express a gendered division of space but rather a hierarchical gradation of value and power. Consequently, control over space signifies control over representations, identities, and social interactions.

The findings of the field study confirm that the social spaces in Tebessa are not neutral givens but constitute an integrated cultural system that reflects and sustains the gender order. While younger generations seek to challenge this distribution, the powerful symbolism attached to these spaces continues to hinder the dismantling of traditional conceptions. Thus, social space remains an instrument for reproducing gender differences, even as it may, in the future, become a means for transcending them.

4.3. Mechanisms of the Reproduction of Gender Conceptions

In the local context of Tebessa Province, gender conceptions do not constitute mere spontaneous reflections or individual beliefs; instead, they are the product of a complex process of socialisation that begins within the family and extends to encompass the school, the mosque, the media, and everyday cultural practices. This process leads to the consolidation of stable patterns of "masculinity" and "femininity" that are reproduced from one generation to the next, despite changes over time.

The family unquestionably represents the primary and most influential institution in shaping gender conceptions. Within the household, children are inculcated with meanings of masculinity and femininity through the discourse of everyday life: what is said, what is forbidden, what is rewarded, and what is punished. One mother stated, "A woman must bring honour to her father, her brother, and her husband," a phrase that encapsulates femininity within values of obedience and collective honour rather than independence or individual achievement.

Boys, by contrast, are expected "to fulfil their imposed duties, such as prayer, study, and helping," as one father explained, that is, to assume responsibility, control emotions, and engage in the public sphere. In this way, male identity is constructed around norms of toughness and control, whereas female identity is built on modesty and discipline. These conceptions are not presented as topics for discussion but are practised as taken-for-granted realities.

Educational institutions, which are presumed to function as instruments of emancipation, also play a clear role in reinforcing these gender roles through curricula and pedagogical interaction. One teacher noted that "girls must be well behaved," a directive that reflects an apparent attempt to regulate girls' presence in the school space and to confine it within the boundaries of compliance and discipline. Despite reform efforts in some schools, these institutions, in the absence of a comprehensive gender-sensitive vision, continue to reproduce stereotypical images: the male as a leader and initiator and the female as subordinate and conservative. Thus, through their content and mechanisms, schools generate fixed conceptions of gender identity.

The media and popular culture play a central role in producing gender conceptions within Tebessa society; rather than merely reflecting reality, they actively contribute to its construction. As Menad (2018) argues, the media does not simply transmit images but also reshapes symbolic representations of gender roles in accordance with a specific value system. The popular proverb "a man is defined by wealth, and a woman by modesty" does not merely reflect a differentiation of roles; it legitimises symbolic subordination presented as a natural social truth. Similarly, Soualmia (2020) maintains that popular culture through songs, tales, and jokes performs a function of "symbolic fixation" of gender

identity, whereby masculinity is reduced to dominance and economic capacity and femininity to obedience and propriety. As a result, these representations appear self-evident and familiar, rendering them difficult to question. In this sense, popular culture can be understood as a productive space for gender, one that is not free from bias and that constitutes an extension of patriarchal authority, even when such authority is expressed in seemingly light or humorous forms.

Social rituals and everyday practices likewise constitute another arena for the reproduction of gender. At weddings, funerals, and family occasions, a clear separation is maintained between men and women, and roles are ritually re-enacted: men speak, decide, and lead; women serve, remain discreet, and monitor their own behaviour. These rituals do not merely reproduce roles but inscribe them within bodies and language.

Nevertheless, despite their effectiveness, these mechanisms no longer operate with the same degree of coherence as in the past. Economic change, migration, education, and exposure to the outside world have begun to create fissures within the symbolic order. Some girls reject unjustified obedience, whereas some young men adopt new conceptions of masculinity. However, the traditional system remains powerful and is internalised by individuals even when they contest it.

The study's findings demonstrate that gender conceptions in the Tebessa region are reproduced through an integrated social and cultural system that mobilises potent symbolic tools, such as religion, language, education, and ritual. Despite the emergence of specific signs of change, this system continues to rest upon a clear gender hierarchy that produces and reproduces "men" and "women" according to criteria that remain largely traditional and conservative. However, signs of negotiation and resistance have begun to surface, particularly among the younger generation.

4. Discussion

4.1. Transformations in Conceptions of Masculinity and Femininity

The study shows that conceptions of masculinity in the Tebessa region no longer possess the symbolic coherence they once did. Traditionally, masculinity was constructed around a triad of strengths, guardianship, and the capacity to provide, reinforcing a preferential conception of the male over the female on the basis of opposing binaries such as hardness–softness, action–passivity, and public–private (Braham, 2019). However, this image has begun to fracture due to economic and social transformations. The figure of the "man" has shifted from a central economic actor to one marked by crisis, particularly amid widespread unemployment, the erosion of paternal authority within the family, and the growing economic and educational independence of women. Field testimonies reveal apparent shifts in masculine discourse, as many young men increasingly associate masculinity with emotional expression, shared responsibility, and psychological support, representing a symbolic rupture with the traditional patriarchal model.

With respect to conceptions of femininity, transformations appear more complex. On the one hand, traditional representations continue to associate femininity with modesty, obedience, and propriety, in line with Menad's (2013) findings, which demonstrate how socialisation processes and educational institutions reinforce stereotypical representations of femininity through an emphasis on obedience, modesty, and honour. On the other hand, new forms of femininity have begun to emerge, characterised by independence, ambition, and engagement in the public sphere. These transformations do not occur in a vacuum; instead, they encounter strong resistance from traditional cultural structures that continue to view women's presence in public space as a threat to the moral cohesion of the family and society.

The generational gap emerged as a central feature of this transformation. Older generations remain attached to traditional conceptions that evoke a "better past" in which everything was "in its proper place," where women did not leave the home and sons did not question their fathers. This finding resonates with Shoshan's (2021) analysis of how the male–female binary is embodied within the social imaginary through Algerian folk tales, in which the symbolic structure is organised around the centrality of the male actor, whereas the female role is marginalised or confined to stereotypical patterns. In contrast, younger generations have become more self-aware and more inclined to negotiate their gender roles, drawing on education, media exposure, and travel.

Nevertheless, resistance to change has not disappeared. Social structures continue to activate multiple mechanisms to preserve traditional conceptions, including discourses of honour, social surveillance, the threat of stigmatisation, and, at times, symbolic and material violence. This corresponds with Menad's (2013) findings regarding how such representations entrench a form of symbolic inferiority of women within social consciousness. However, everyday practices reveal what may be described as "silent fractures," whereby social discourse has become more conservative than actual behaviour, and both women and men increasingly act in their daily lives in ways that diverge from what is publicly proclaimed.

2.4. Factors influencing the formation of gender conceptions

Gender identity refers to the manner in which individuals define themselves within the system of sex and gender, encompassing traits and behaviours that are socially perceived as "appropriate" to a given sex. According to Al-Ruhaili (2016), this identity is formed through complex interactions among biological, social, and cultural factors and is not a fixed or natural given but rather the product of processes of socialisation and interaction with one's environment.

This conceptualisation enables an understanding of gender conceptions in the Tebessa region not only as a biological reality but also as a social construction shaped by multiple historical, economic, and cultural determinants. This aligns with Braham's (2019) study of the traditional family, which demonstrated how gender conceptions are reproduced through rites of passage, popular proverbs, and local cultural heritage. Economic factors, particularly unemployment and migration, have been among the most significant determinants in reshaping representations of masculinity. In the absence of employment opportunities, men are often unable to fulfil traditional expectations of manhood, prompting many to seek alternative forms of symbolic compensation, such as moral rigidity, authoritarian behaviour within the family, or even withdrawal from social life.

Social factors have likewise played a pivotal role. Partial urbanisation, rising levels of education, and the expanding presence of women in universities and the labour market have all contributed to the emergence of new feminine models. Education has not merely functioned as a means of social mobility but has also become a symbolic tool for the reconfiguration of feminine subjectivity, in contrast to what Menad (2013) observed regarding the encouragement of men towards independence and initiative. Nevertheless, education has remained burdened with gendered expectations, as the "successful" woman is still ultimately expected to remain committed to her role as wife and mother.

Local culture, with its traditions and popular proverbs, continues to exert a powerful influence over gender representations, functioning as a symbolic guardian of traditional roles. This confirms the importance of local cultural heritage in the reproduction of gender conceptions, as noted by Braham (2019). Religious discourse, particularly in its populist forms, is employed to reinforce rigid classifications between males and females and continues to serve as a moral reference for regulating behaviour.

Global influences through globalisation, communication technologies, and travel have also come to play an increasingly significant role, especially among young people. Alternative models of masculinity and femininity circulate through television series, social media platforms, and globalised content, generating a state of tension between a "local traditional reference framework" and a "modern global imaginary."

3.4. Strategies of Negotiation and Resistance

In response to the tension between traditional reference frameworks and a changing reality, both women and men have developed diverse strategies of negotiation. In particular, women have emerged as key agents in the internal reconfiguration of masculinity and femininity, moving beyond the stereotypical pattern identified by Shoshan (2021) in her analysis of women's positioning within narrative texts as a reflection of a social structure that internalises rigid gender hierarchies. Some women have adopted forms of silent resistance through education, employment, and independence without openly breaking with the traditional system, instead presenting themselves as "respectable women nonetheless." Others have pursued overt resistance by rejecting marriage, choosing independent lifestyles, or engaging in political or civic activism.

Men, for their part, have also found themselves compelled to negotiate their masculinity, departing from the traditional conception of the central male actor highlighted by Shoshan (2021). While some reproduce traditional masculinity through rigidity and domination within the family, others attempt to adopt new, partnership-based models. Among these positions, hybrid forms of masculinity have emerged, oscillating between conservatism and openness. Many young men expressed confusion in the face of contemporary demands, as masculinity is no longer clear or stable but has become contingent upon variables beyond their control.

Forms of resistance have not been solely individual but, at times, collective, manifesting in student groups, women's associations, and social media networks. These spaces have become refuges for exchanging experiences and expressing gendered selves beyond the reach of direct social surveillance.

Every day practice further reveals that individuals adapt to the contradictions between discourse and practice through a form of "identity duality": they publicly declare allegiance to traditional discourse while privately acting in accordance with modern conditions. In some cases, social spaces such as universities and cafés have been redefined as alternative, hybrid arenas that accommodate flexible, evolving gender identities.

Conclusion

The conceptions of masculinity and femininity within the social imaginary of the Tebessa region reflect a complex symbolic system grounded in deeply rooted and inherited cultural structures while simultaneously being subjected to pressures arising from multiple social and economic transformations, rendering them open to renegotiation and reconfiguration. The study has demonstrated that these conceptions are not merely reflections of biological givens or natural differences between the sexes but rather the product of long historical, cultural, and social processes in which the local intersects with the transboundary and the traditional with the modern. As such, they constitute a living expression of power relations and identity dynamics within the local community.

Through field-based analysis, it became evident that gender identity is constructed and reproduced through multiple channels, beginning with socialisation within the family, extending through educational institutions, and encompassing the media and social rituals. All of these operate in different ways to stabilise or transform conceptions of masculinity and femininity. The study also revealed apparent generational gaps in understanding gender roles, as younger generations increasingly seek to break with traditional constraints and engage with more flexible, inclusive models that redefine notions of manhood and womanhood in light of contemporary changes.

Despite emerging signs of change, numerous challenges remain. The traditional symbolic system continues to exert a strong influence, relying on stringent mechanisms of social regulation such as religious discourse, family norms, and popular proverbs that internalise entrenched gender distinctions. Nevertheless, some indicators point to the gradual formation of new spaces for negotiation and change, as women and men in the Tebessa region have become more capable of negotiating their gender identities, drawing on educational opportunities and increased openness to the outside world.

In conclusion, this study opens new avenues for further research into the impact of economic and technological transformations on gender conceptions in border societies while also contributing to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which identities are reconfigured within changing cultural contexts. This remains an ongoing challenge for researchers in anthropology and sociology.

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