

The Power Game within the Couple: Is the Woman Empowered when she is the Family Breadwinner?

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Abstract

In the present research work, we hypothesize that one of the consequences of the empowerment model is the increasing visibility of "female breadwinners/higher earners" as a social category. It, therefore, exposes the power interplay among married female providers within their households as a result of disturbing traditional gender norms in an attempt to tease out the impact of gender, status and income on power relations within marriage.

Keywords: *Female breadwinners, family roles, bargaining strategies, decision-making, family-work conflict.*

لعبة السلطة في إطار العلاقات الأسرية: هل يمكن اعتبار كون المرأة العائلة ماديا لأسرتها تمكينها لها؟

ملخص

إن لدخول المرأة عالم الشغل دورا محوريا في تحقيقها للاستقلالية وإعطائها مركزا مرموقا داخل المجتمع وذلك يؤثر بشكل مباشر على علاقات الجندر. يطرح هذا المقال فرضية أنه من بين نتائج تطبيق نموذج تمكين المرأة في الجزائر ظهور شريحة من النساء العائلات لأسرهن واللواتي يفوق دخلهن دخل الزوج مما يؤدي إلى زعزعة النظام الذكوري الذي حكم العلاقة بين الرجل والمرأة لعقود. ولذلك فقد تم تسليط الضوء على ممارسة القوة والسلطة من طرف هذه الفئة من النساء وتأثير حرية المرأة المالية على مكانتها وعلاقتها الأسرية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: *مرأة عائلة للأسرة، أدوار داخل الأسرة، استراتيجيات المساومة، عملية اتخاذ القرار، تعارض الأدوار الأسرية والمهنية.*

Le jeu de pouvoir au sein du couple: être chef de ménage favorise-t-il l'autonomisation de la femme?

Résumé

Dans le présent travail, nous émettons l'hypothèse que l'une des conséquences du modèle d'autonomisation des femme est la visibilité croissante des «femmes chefs de ménage/ possédants le revenus le plus élevés dans le couple» en tant que catégorie sociale. Il expose donc le rapport de force entre les femmes mariées au sein de leur ménage en raison de la perturbation des normes traditionnelles de genre dans une tentative de démêler l'impact du sexe, du statut et du revenu sur les relations de pouvoir au sein du mariage.

Mots-clés: *Femme chef de ménage, rôles au sein de la famille, stratégies de négociation, processus décisionnel, opposition entre rôles familiaux et professionnels.*

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Introduction:

A realistic examination is required when engaging in an exploration of the inner structures involved in producing and sketching the traits of a whole social category, fault of a range of feminist accounts on the MENA region that have portrayed a disturbingly victimized and an overwhelmingly homogenous picture of what women are enduring. This literature, generally qualified as '*misery research*'⁽¹⁾ has eventually led to overlooking determining and equally important factors, mainly the economic one, its consequences and the challenges ahead.

The question of women's work may be perceived as stemming from a masculinist view of the world. That is, one rarely, if ever, hears of men's work issues or conciliation of work-family life for the simple reason that exercising any kind of work is in itself a human right with no distinction whatsoever. This indicates a deep binarization and a hierarchy inherent in the social system governing gender relations.

However, women are actively engaged in shaping and more powerfully occupying a privileged position within the public space and even adjusting it in the private. This research, attempts to scrutinize the social manifestation of this position. The present research sheds light on women's work from the angle of the power interplay between women's position as breadwinners and wives to fathom the complex construction of women's agency that constantly involves negotiation, acceptance and assertion. This very perception stems from our observation of the significance of work (paid-work) among people, and of special interest to this investigation women, that has undergone a process of drainage off its essential purpose, that of value-exchange among the parties involved and its reduction into a mere source of material revenue and in many cases, liberation from dependence on the male provision. That is, a considerable number of people today enter the workforce for financial revenue regardless of whether it represents a value for them.

Due to massive structural changes affecting the Algerian family, ranks within it have also been subject to reorganization. The label 'head of household' is entitled to the male father in the patriarchal family. Notwithstanding, nowadays this position has acquired a rather looser aspect to encompass other members of the household based on economic factors.

1- Conceptual Framework:

The present research paper hinges on concepts that are believed to best elucidate the phenomenon of breadwinning and the way it is approached and managed by couples.

1-1- The work-family conflict: social role theory posits that the genders' involvement in household chores is determined by their actual perceptions. At present time couples carry a non-traditional trait, women seek education and highly achieving career paths leading their household responsibilities to reach a complex situation. Several factors are involved in a work-family conflict like the total working hours and the nature of the job itself, in addition to family-related factors such as uncooperative family members, interpersonal divergence within the family entity, and care responsibilities.

Work-family conflict may take three main forms: strain-based, time-based and behavior-based.

Time-based conflict arises when the amount of time destined toward a specific family duty is taken by professional duties.

Strain-based conflict occurs when the responsibilities of the individual and the ensuing burden experienced in one role, makes it difficult to effectively and efficiently perform the other role⁽²⁾.

Behaviour-based conflict is associated with the incompatibility in roles and the way the individual deals with the challenges both in the household and in the workplace.

1-2- Decision-making:

Decision-making is one of the most determining aspects of the allocation of agency within the couple. It is a process that involves different phases and the extent to which it is granted to an individual is dictated by social norms depending on his/her role within the household. However, subtle negotiations exist between men and women as to attributing certain roles

according to the individual's knowledge and experience in the different fields of marital life, in addition to the 'backstage' influence that women especially exert in redirecting their husbands' decisions, this is what Kandyoti labelled '*bargaining strategies*'⁽³⁾.

1-3- Bargaining Strategies:

1-3-1- Retraditionalization as a Deviance Neutralization Strategy:

The gender division of work exacerbates the situation for a working woman and when she earns more, it gets further complicated. The patriarchal structure of the Algerian family endows status to females through domestic activities and to the male through earning. However, since gender roles have not remained static constructs, female earners strive to secure themselves a place and overemphasize their presence within the family. This might be explained by a sense of guilt toward and dissatisfaction with what she offers in her family life. Therefore, she compensates by adhering to the gendered model of the housewife increasing the effort of doing the household chores, increasing her emotional investment with the children, or even re-asserting her femininity by creating her own enjoyable rituals nurtured by the consumer culture. Therefore, the woman seeks a re-confirmation of her status replicating the very model she sought to rebel against.

The couple may have recourse to 'traditional gender roles', i.e. the higher-earning wife adjusts the power asymmetry that may ensue from her economic superiority, leaving more floor to the male in household decision making and for herself in doing more care activities.

Analytical approaches in family studies have considerably contributed to elucidating the aforementioned issue. According to economic theories on the gender division of labour in the household, the relative resource approach, which is based on the exchange of inputs and outcomes (earning and housework), the more the individual brings resources to the household the less housework s/he does, which is supposed to bring proportional decreases in women's housework as a result of the increase in their income. Notwithstanding, the analysis of the interviewed women's responses proved no shift in the traditional model of housework as women's work. It is possible to surmise, then, that gender ideology is still at work, which is what Brines⁽⁴⁾ labels 'deviance neutralization' where couples who violate the male breadwinner model tend to rectify the mismatch with stereotypical roles and conform to the prescribed ones to achieve 'gender accountability' (acceptance) in their social environment. One of the mechanisms of neutralization and naturalization is the adoption of oppositional behavioural patterns to their actual roles.

Additionally, the in-laws play a pivotal role as a third party in ensuring the reproduction of doing gender as dictated by patriarchal authority, in return for cultural recognition.

2- Method:

Any investigation of close relationships takes account of the everyday lived experiences as structured events having reciprocal effects. Hence, a one-sided analysis of women's lives in isolation from others is debased and leads to unsatisfactory conclusions. To unearth these potential inconsistencies, three interrelated domains of the participants' experiences have been analyzed. These domains are higher earner role attitude, work-family balance and bargaining strategies.

Directed content analysis was devised to code and analyze the data. Participants' statements were transcribed and grouped according to codes used to identify the covered themes (categories). For example, a respondent may claim: "In my case, the major part of my income is saved for big projects, I mean buying a house or a car and everyday expenditures are covered mainly by my husband's income". The category is decision making and the code is income division.

A Focus group as an analysis technique was devised given its particular sensitivity to cultural variables.

The obtained data were classified into headings (categories) covering excerpts from participants' answers (codes). Account was taken of the actual situation of the female

(breadwinners) respondents whether it was a transitional or persistent period. On the basis of that, they were categorized into committed and incidental breadwinners:

Committed breadwinner refers to the state in which one partner takes up the responsibility of being the primary provider for the household.

Incidental breadwinner is a situation that happens as a result of the committed breadwinner's abrupt inability to fulfil the role of the provider. Consequently, the partner is obliged to take this role instead.

3- Results:

3-1- The Demographic Profile of Respondents:

Before opting for the focus group data analysis, the respondents were asked specific questions to determine their sociodemographic profile demonstrated in the following table:

Table (3.1): a Typology of the Female Breadwinners' Households

Respondents	Age	Type of family
R1	48	Committed female breadwinner family
R2	32	Incidental female breadwinner family
R3	50	Committed
R4	39	Committed
R5	34	Gender-equal
R6	29	Committed
R7	41	Incidental
R8	42	Incidental
R9	36	Committed
R10	32	Committed

Source: designed by the authors

3-2- The Higher Earner Status:

The focus group discussions started with questions on the participants' and their partners' perceptions about their actual status.

In the first domain of analysis, the sampled subjects were asked what their status as a female breadwinner represented for them and whether their jobs were mere sources of material income. The following table displays the responses suggested:

Table (3.2): The Higher Earner Status

Category	Code	Statement
Breadwinner status attitude	Provider Status: The wife's perception	It's a matter of agreement, ..I'm a superwoman, we are multitasker, (sigh), it's a burden for me", "we as women have very poor exit options in marriage ...", "I think it's an advantage because I provide a decent life for my children." It's a burden for me...
	Husband's perception	"... they're sometimes jealous of women's success

	Perception of Status as working woman	<p>“he’s very open-minded,... I got promotions with the support of my husband”</p> <p>“He becomes violent especially when we discuss financial matters.”</p> <p>“I feel productive, I feel myself.”</p> <p>“I like my job and I chose to work in this domain although I can’t deny my need for the paycheck,”</p> <p>“I really wish he could find a better job ...so that I can quit”</p> <p>“Employment is a protection for women nowadays.”</p>
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Source: designed by the authors.

The majority described their status of family breadwinners as imposed on them as a result of the employment and underemployment crisis. The marriage composition with the emergence of hypogamic couples where the female is more educated, with higher earning potential on the one hand, and the requirements of modern life nurtured with, on the other.

One of the participants in the focus group reported that she had been part of her husband’s “business plans”:

“When I got married, my husband told me that we had to think about our future by starting to think about buying a house, and I agreed and as his income was unstable, I am the one who saves for buying the house beside covering my children’s daily needs”.

Another one reported being exploited and sometimes blackmailed by her spouse. One of them said that since she got married, her income goes to her husband and he is the one in charge of household expenditures. Although she did not accept it, yet, she complied out of fear of ruining her family life.

For breadwinners in gender-equal couples, it was less of a burden and more a matter of free choice and convenient arrangement.

As to their perception vis-à-vis their jobs, accidental breadwinners claimed they opted for work as a result of financial need, while interestingly, there was a considerable agreement among the others for a rather positive view of their jobs as adding a value to their lives and being a haven from their family-work load.

3-3- Work-family Conflict:

Another important issue raised during the discussions was the tension-causing work and family pressure if not well-managed. These women are the primary providers for their families and multiple roles may be demanding and run the risk of failing women to fulfil their duties in both domains leading to role strain.

A key parameter to create work-family balance is the flexibility of schedule and the appropriate distribution of care activities. The majority of the women agreed on arguments related to their inability to reconcile their work-family life. They described it as a constant battle and the major cause behind their arguments with their spouses. Excerpts from their experiences are displayed in the following table:

Table (3.3): Work-family Conflict

Category	Code	Statement
Work-family conflict	Flexibility of schedule	<p>“I tend to adjust my home activities according to my work hours”</p> <p>“We try to do our best, but I don’t think any working wife is able to handle both perfectly, it’s impossible</p>

		unless she gets the appropriate help”
	Care work	<p>“Before going on a maternity leave, I have to secure my children’s needs because no one else would care about them while I am at home”</p> <p>“..my husband does not do much to help, he says this is not his job”</p>

Source: designed by the author.

The redistribution/recognition model elaborated by Fraser (2004) is present in this case as maldistribution and misrecognition as a two-dimensional paradigm affecting women. The redistribution of material goods to the category of women through access to education and employment has not guaranteed them recognition. Rather, it has trickled down the goods to men and contributed further to injustice between the genders as *‘an institutionalized relation of subordination’*⁽⁵⁾.

3-4- Marital Quality:

The results obtained for this variable reflect a lack of the required support for personal and professional growth on the part of the husband. The group discussion revealed a disconnection between the professional and personal aspects of the sampled women’s lives, which they did not directly blame on the spouse but disclosed several other reasons, mainly related to their own lack of motivation or their responsibilities as wives and mothers.

The themes raised in communication ranged from discussions over economic decisions, relationships and children's matters mainly to make a decision or settle a disagreement. The point of emphasis in this variable was the power negotiation between couples with regard to relative influence (discussing matters of interest, decision making,) and relative benefit (ending the discussion for mutual good).

3-5- Decision-Making:

According to the respondents’ statements, the couples are being just in dealing with their daily household issues. The most knowledgeable in the domain is autonomous in the decision making process, taking into account the partner’s wishes so that both parties benefit. For instance, in case the female is better in finances, she takes care of the household expenditures and distribution of goods, even though she might be traditionally considered unfit for the task. This case reveals other parameters influencing the power negotiation among couples in the decision-making process. Knowledge of the domain and communication strategies are strong determinants of the decision-making process.

Marital dynamics remain influenced by cultural residues. This is what draws women to more subtle strategies to influence decision-making and other relational aspects.

The table below unravels the power interplay within the couple:

Table (3.4): Decision-Making

Category	Code	Statement
Decision-Making	Individual-related decisions	<p>“Before going on a maternity leave, I have to secure my children’s needs because no one else would care about them while I am at home”</p> <p>“..my husband does not do much to help, he says this is not his job”</p> <p>“...if there is a decision to be made, he trusts my knowledge.”</p>
	Material decisions	<p>“I think he’s using me to get the money and spend it the way he wants,...”</p> <p>“Before all, it is a partnership, our finances are combined and it does not pose a problem for me or my husband, he contributes as much as he can and I do the same..”</p> <p>“...the major part of my income is saved for big projects.., he is the one who provides for the household.., but a working woman willy-nilly contributes to her household expenses.</p> <p>I cover all my household financial needs, he occasionally helps.</p>

Source: made by the author.

According to some testimonies, the male partner regards his wife’s economic status as a threat and attempts to recreate a patriarchal gender order where he occupies the superior position because he considers his wife’s status as a deprivation of his masculinity and authority. This has deleterious repercussions on both partners. As a consequence, the female is not only ‘*misrecognized*’ but lacking *self-realization*. As a response to that, the female may have recourse to strategies that attenuate the situation.

The traditional sexual contract that binds women and men into feminine and masculine roles within the family does not only separate spheres (public and private) but it reinforces the patriarchal ideology of masculine domination as well. Status has changed over the decades but the principle remains the same. Females face a great difficulty in exchanging their income contribution for domestic services, although they share more of it with men than in the past but do not reach the proportional level.

3-6- Bargaining Strategies:

3-6-1 Retraditionalization as a Deviance neutralization strategy:

Table (3.6): Bargaining Strategies

Category	Code	Statement
Bargaining Strategies	Retraditionalization (Re-doing gender)	<p>“I do not feel doing enough and therefore I always try to create family time</p>

		activities.” I try to offer things other than money ...things that give me a sense of my femininity” “I try to give enough time to look after myself”
	Un-doing gender	“...he does the housework, he looks after the children.. “we agreed upon marriage that I take up the financial part and he takes care of the children. until our financial situation improves.”
	Social impact and overcoming social sanctions	‘..friends and family admire us, they perceive us as a strong couple” “..he transforms into a totally different person in front of our relatives, he says it makes him less manly in their eyes” they feel they lost their manhood and that they’d be viewed as less manly if they can’t bring enough money to the house. a man is recognized by his ability to provider. , it is part of our traditions and our religion,... “quiwama” is for the male”

Source: designed by the authors

The women subject of the study embrace their true femininity at home. Despite all inconveniences they might face, they still consider it a conservative feminine empowerment and to stifle its fading away, they battle to put it back in place. To gain weight and stature, they contend that they necessarily pass through the home.

Women have today found themselves ensconced within the work field that seems to be ripping off their femininity. Hence, they reinstate and secure their identity through leaning toward hyper-feminine values promoted by the consumer culture (what Mcrobbie calls the new traditionalism)⁽⁶⁾. Interestingly enough, 7 out of 10 respondents believed in the strength, sense of independence and achievement their status brought them. Paradoxically, this very status was at the origin of a somewhat distorted interpersonal relationship. They experience and develop a complex and unique communal identity in providing for their dependents financially and emotionally.

3-6-2- Undoing Gender:

Gender ideology occupies a large share of Algerian common consciousness, and any transformation has to occur in a subtle way. Individuals are more prone to accepting the adoption of certain behavioural patterns different from their socialization in private settings than in public ones.

One of the respondents claimed:

“My husband has no problem with me being a breadwinner, he does the housework, he looks after the children but he transforms into a totally different person in front of our relatives, he says it makes him less manly in their eyes”.

Another one stated: “he would only help out if he wants to; it all depends on his whim, he says he feels like I’m dictating to him what to do”.

Social image is pivotal in the construction of identity, this is why males may well be in favor of gender justice among members of the household but refuse to jeopardize their socially acceptable masculinity. Some of the respondents stated that their partners felt emasculated by their (wives’) status and they did everything it took to create a gender order that guarantees them authority. Sex roles remain socially determined, and as these males have lost their ability to effectively fulfill the breadwinner role (by conventional social standards), they experience a sense of emasculation that could be compensated by exaggerated masculine behavior.

When the husband is unemployed, the situation gets dire for both spouses. The supposed work-family enrichment can suddenly transform into a conflict threatening the household stability. It may be caused by the inability to fulfil an expected gender role and a worker role that each is determined by distinct social institutions. In addition, the interviewed women referred to their husbands as the household heads throughout the discussions and stated that they actually wanted their husbands to play this role, on the one hand, as a conflict avoidance strategy respecting the patriarchal hierarchy of status, even though these women are the actual breadwinners, on the other, to satisfy an unconscious desire to be under the headship of a man.

Women’s responses overlapped to convey a single voice and agreement regarding the topic of status differential among spouses. Many of the interviewed women are unable or unwilling to negotiate their income for more egalitarian relationships with their spouses.

3-6-3- Social Impact and Overcoming Social Sanctions:

In this case, women come to gradually understand their role as primary earners and rise above circumstances of patriarchal perceptions and expectations, although women have infiltrated into traditionally-set gender roles, their role as breadwinners remain perceived as an emergent circumstance, as a condition in which she has no choice.

Considering the information derived from both focus group discussions, the major concern for participants was an image of masculinity based on narratives of economic and personality strength and any disruption of this model would lead to misrecognition and stigmatization of the male, even though the image of role reversed couples is timidly gaining ground as a result of the educational and labour market opportunities available to females.

Gender role ideology persists in our society and yields a heavy burden for both husbands and wives in female breadwinner households. Husbands may experience a masculinity crisis as they attempt to fit in the mould or they may turn into some sort of "gigolo" males benefiting from the luxury of not having to bear this responsibility, and the women who accept are just terrified of their inability to earn the status of "married".

In reality, many of the interviewed women were not aware of their role as breadwinners; they considered themselves as sharing financial responsibilities with their partners. They even stated that traditional gender roles should be abided by outside the home and that their status was not something to vaunt about.

The informants admitted not being willing to fulfil the role of breadwinner if they had the choice. They also admitted that their work took precedence over their family life since it is the engine keeping their lives moving (financially).

Contrary to the image advanced of the successful self-reliant female breadwinner, most of the females in the studied group, attribute their current situation to necessity and economic limitations.

The results reveal the relative stability of the gender order that governs women's and men's lives. Consequently, earning does not guarantee a free ticket to equality, it may be a necessity but not sufficient to restructure the very system that governs its members' actions.

Conclusion:

Economic stability is certainly a determinant of empowerment for women, however, it may at times be a hindrance when implemented in an environment imbued with patriarchal beliefs and norms. The issue that arises, in this case, is whether both men and women can transcend this obstacle for a more fulfilling relationship and to effectively exert an impact within the gender order.

To achieve tangible outcomes in favor of gender justice, Women empowerment must be considered as a multistage and multifaceted process that affects different dimensions of life both individual and larger societal levels. Access to education and paid work constitute only one aspect of empowerment which, if not invested appropriately, will certainly fail to uplift gender relations and women's status. This process cannot reach its apex without involving women as active agents in its realization rather than being its passive recipients. Therefore, in this research we attempted to shed light on the potential opportunities for improvement that not only access to resources (education and income) may allow women, but their actual control over them.

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