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Gender and Work Relations through the Representations of Administrative employees

A Study on a Sample of Employees at Tahri Mohammed University, Béchar – Algeria –

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Abstract :

The study aims to identify administrative employees' representations at Tahri Mohammed University in Béchar regarding the variable of gender and its effect on workplace relations and social processes—such as joint work, conflict, competition, and leadership—through the guiding question: Does gender emerge as an explanatory factor for understanding work relations and social processes from the perspective of actors within the work environment? The working hypothesis posits a clear presence of this variable in individuals' representations. The research employed content analysis using an objective thematic approach to examine core axes directly connected to the study's hypothesis, utilizing a semi-structured interview tool to deepen understanding of participants' experiences and representations with a quota sample of 22 administrators (13 men, 9 women) from Tahri Mohammed University of Béchar, with fieldwork conducted between December 2024 and late January 2025. The study concludes that gender emerges as an active variable exerting positive influence through cooperation and negative influence through conflict and misunderstanding, alongside the manifestation of male dominance to varying degrees and an increasing acceptance of women's leadership; thus, understanding representations becomes an entry point for analyzing the organization's culture and structure.

Keywords: gender; work relations; representations .

1. Introduction

Over recent decades, the topic of gender has been widely examined sociologically in Algerian studies, reflecting deep transformations within Algerian society as public attitudes toward women's education and employment have shifted positively and traditional values concerning women's work and schooling have gradually receded; these changes constitute one of the fruits of this transformation. Women have consequently achieved numerous gains, including higher educational attainment across diverse fields, which has facilitated their entry into the labor market in multiple sectors such as medicine, administration, education, and law.

The growing participation of girls in education—particularly higher education—and their entry into the labor market offers compelling evidence of a changing value system and evolving societal views on women's education and employment outside the home (Bouchlouch, 2018). However, most of these studies have emphasized women's presence in the social sphere in general by focusing on shifts in roles and status, while research has only rarely addressed gender within the workplace through the lens of representations, conflict, and competition. The salience of gender in the core social processes of organizational and work environments supports efforts to understand and analyze the organization's structure and dynamics. The workplace is a domain of interaction among workers (men and women) within an organizational system known as work relations, whose formation can be traced to the Industrial Revolution as a starting point for constructing such relations as professional social ties that arise among members of the organization. These interactions unfold in a professional arena among employees and are expressed in forms of cooperation, solidarity, respect, and stability on the one hand, and in misunderstandings and disputes among employees on the other; the existence of understanding does not imply the absence of conflict in professional settings.

Work relations are the product of a social reality constituted by a set of structures and frameworks within society. Each worker brings a repertoire of norms, values, customs, and culture, and this milieu directly shapes and frames these relations, which are among the key components of gender. With women's entry into professional life—historically dominated by men—and despite the progress achieved by working women, challenges persist in workplace settings alongside men, particularly given the potential reproduction of societal contexts that prescribe the nature of women's relationships with men at work.

Gender provokes both scholarly and public debate, especially in workplace environments imbued with relatively traditional social culture, which generates a range of interactions and behavioral patterns that entrench an organization's

culture. This underscores the need to study the subject through the experiences and representations of the concerned actors themselves, beginning from the following guiding question:

2. Research question

Does the variable of gender emerge as a factor that helps in understanding and analyzing work relations and social processes from the perspective of individuals within the work environment?

3. Hypothesis

There is a discernible presence of the gender variable in individuals' representations of work relations and of various social processes—such as conflict, cooperation, and competition—within the work environment.

4. Objectives of the Study

- To explore the phenomenon of gender in the workplace and its repercussions for workplace relations from the perspective of employees.
- To examine how workers conceive of and interpret the concept of gender and professional relations.
- To identify the realities of professional relations in administration from a gender-based perspective.

5. Study concepts

5.1. Work relations

Work relations are the social ties and linkages that arise between employees and the employing authority in administration or in the realm of work, encompassing relations among employees themselves and with their superiors; they are established legally by a contract that generates rights and obligations in accordance with the law and collective agreements (Badawi, 1993, p. 238). In Algerian legislation, they are defined as a relationship constituted by a person performing work for another under that party's supervision in exchange for wages, by means of a written contract that creates rights and obligations (Law 90/11, 1990). Work relations include both formal and informal dimensions; they form a complex network of professional ties as well as friendships that emerge from interactions among individuals in the workplace, giving rise to diverse phenomena and processes.

5.2. Gender

Gender is a term that refers to the social differences, roles, behaviors, and attributes that a society assigns to males and females, and that vary across time and place; it is distinguished from biological sex, which refers to biological characteristics present at birth (Al-Tayeb, 2011, p. 107). According to the American Psychological Association, gender denotes socially shaped roles, behaviors, activities, and traits that any society considers appropriate for different

identities (American Psychological Association, 2025). Gender is a complex concept with interwoven psychological and sociological dimensions ; it concerns the ways in which a set of attributes and roles confer specific characteristics upon males and females, thereby shaping each party's frames of reference and behavior.

5.3.Social representations

A social representation is a socio-psychological construct that performs a symbolic role, insofar as it represents an object for a person or a group ; the representation thus becomes a substitute for the object it represents for the social actor (Wachelke, 2012, p. 264). Social representations are integrated sets of stances, ideas, feelings, and orientations adopted by individuals and groups toward a given object—whether an idea, a person, or a thing. They are formed through psychological and affective processes alongside rational strategies, through which individuals build diverse representations that reflect shared understandings of different topics; these representations then become a cognitive reference embedded in collective consciousness, shared among individuals and groups to organize the perception and interpretation of surrounding social reality (Hamleel, 2025, pp. 15–16). In this study, social representations denote how individuals in the workplace reconstruct and conceptualize various topics—such as gender and work relations—whereby these topics can be understood more deeply through attitudes. Stances, and perceptions.

6. Spatial and temporal scope

The fieldwork was conducted in the city of Béchar, Algeria—specifically at Tahri Mohamed University of Béchar—and spanned approximately two months, from early December 2024 to late January 2025.

7. Methodology

The study adopted content analysis as a research method, regarded as an analytic approach grounded in sufficiently accurate and adequate information about the topic, with the aim of arriving at suitable interpretations of the subject under investigation. More specifically, the “objective” content analysis approach was employed, focusing on core themes directly related to the study's hypothesis, in order to concentrate participants' responses around a given idea and to analyze and interpret them in line with the research objectives. Building on this, the study used the semi-structured interview as a direct technique to question participants with a view to deepening knowledge of the researched individuals, their opinions, and their conceptions of the study topic—a technique well-suited to investigating social representations and probing the depths of the subject by grasping participants' understandings as personal experiences, conceptions, and interpretations.

8. Sample

The study population consisted of administrative employees at Tahri Mohamed University of Béchar. The study aimed to ensure proportional representation of both men and women in the sample; accordingly, quota sampling was deemed most appropriate. The final sample comprised 22 participants—13 men and 9 women—allocated in line with the proportion of each quota in the parent population.

9. Presentation and analysis of interviews

The field data obtained through the interview tool are presented and analyzed according to the objective content analysis approach, whereby the researcher focuses on processing core themes discussed with participants that have a direct bearing on the study's research question and hypothesis.

9.1. First theme: cooperation in the workplace and gender

Participants reported that relationships with colleagues are fraternal and cooperative in nature, as coworkers share the same tasks and thus serve as mutual support for one another—especially given that they spend most of their time together at work compared to time spent at home—creating a collegial, solidaristic work atmosphere. Colleagueship, for them, is not confined to formal duties and roles; rather, it extends beyond that, as evidenced by their meetings outside work (e.g., chatting, having coffee together). Meanwhile, the workday is experienced as ordinary professional hours during which responsibilities and tasks are shared, given the shared workspace; in cases of problems at work—stemming from mere misunderstandings—participants seek to find solutions. As one interviewee said, “We do not want it to reach the administration.” The perceived reasons for cooperation and understanding include educational and cultural alignment, in addition to professional experience and many years of working together. Others, however, view assistance and consultation at work as overlaps and encroachments in relationships, drawing boundaries for themselves; as one interviewee stated, “Each person has their place—we are here to perform a job, and that is all,” which renders such relations strictly formal and task-bound, given that the workplace is solely for professional functions. Regarding working with the other sex (women), participants indicated acceptance of having a woman as a supervisor by virtue of delegated authority and compliance with her instructions and directives; indeed, some noted positives associated with men and women working together in the same environment. Nevertheless, occasional sensitivities arise between men and women, particularly among male workers who reject feminine authority over them. As one female interviewee remarked, “Some men still do not accept the idea of a woman being above them in the organizational hierarchy; even so, this is normal, limited, and not troubling.” This does not

amount to workplace conflict per se, but rather to misunderstandings and minor misinterpretations.

A cooperative and consultative style is deemed suitable for maintaining the organizational climate and working conditions, affording both management and employees the opportunity to express views on matters related to the work atmosphere and daily issues. This aligns with Chester Barnard's view of organizations as cooperative systems: the more an organization enhances effective cooperation among employees—manifest in communication, constructive professional ties, and willingness to work—the more capable it becomes of achieving its objectives.

Work relations are not limited to balance, friendship, and cooperation; divergent situations may involve competition and conflict. Numerous studies point to the role of demographic and personality factors—and their fit—in shaping the cohesion and dynamics of work groups. When men and women interact in the workplace, one might expect gender-based incongruence and conflict, but this is not necessarily the case; more complex factors, such as cultural background, acceptance of the other, and gendered coexistence, may exert stronger influence. In sum, the prevailing work climate in organizational settings—reflected positively on employees and on service quality—can be traced to group cohesion and cooperation, alongside the basic needs that members seek to satisfy through the work group. All of this points to the value and importance of professional ties within the organization and their effects—both negative and positive. Naturally, gender may be a decisive variable in fostering a balanced work environment; conversely, it may have the opposite effect through signs of gender conflict or gender-based discrimination, especially toward working women, either as lived realities or from a feminist standpoint.

9.2 Second theme: conflict and discrimination in the workplace and gender

Some participants—men and women—affirmed the presence of conflict in the workplace, attributing it to several reasons. Chief among these were work shirking and dependency, which have encouraged the spread of loafing in the workplace; as a result, extra tasks are assigned to the employee who is present, who in turn performs the duties of the absent worker—often justified by illness or by candidacy for a recruitment competition. Added to this are cultural misalignment and differences that hinder communication and interaction among employees, especially where intergenerational gaps are present. One interviewee reported verbal altercations and harassment by senior management due to his dispute with a female employee who refused to carry out assigned tasks; being older and near retirement with extensive experience, he felt compelled to relinquish his office

and transfer to another unit to avoid conflict and tension. Others added that work pressures and long hours can sour the work atmosphere, leading to boredom and routine and distancing employees from the spirit of public service. From the interviews, it was observed that seasoned employees no longer exhibit the same willingness to give as at the start of their careers; instead, they now aim simply to perform their assigned duties, which, unwittingly, isolates them functionally from certain informal entities. Some participants also stated that discrimination exists in the workplace between men and women, even if subtle. As one employee indicated, social and cultural differences persist in the professional sphere: despite being a work environment, employees cannot shed the sediment of the broader social milieu. The status of the male worker is often seen as superior to that of the female, even when the woman holds a higher position in the organizational hierarchy or surpasses him in educational and academic standing. Regarding promotions and senior posts, most interviewees maintained that these are matters of merit for both sexes and are settled by Algerian law; nonetheless, some manipulations persist, as one female participant remarked: "Some promotion posts are not granted to us as women, and if one is granted, it occurs through connections or favoritism."

Professional relations among administrative members are not confined to amicability and friendship that ultimately foster institutional complementarity; rather, divergent situations reveal manifestations of dispute and conflict as social processes arising from misunderstandings within the organizational climate. Ensuring alignment and consultation at work does not eliminate disputes; differences in opinions, ideas, and personal viewpoints can translate into conflicts and contentious behaviors that disturb the professional environment. This leads to the formation of subgroups somewhat detached from the spirit of collective work, as certain employees lack a sense of purpose in their roles.

The emergence of gender-based discrimination in the workplace entrenches the absence of organizational justice and constrains women's professional trajectories, narrowing personal aspirations; regardless of capability, skill and competence development cannot be sustained, and work rewards are withheld, producing feelings of contempt and powerlessness. In a British study, (Takeda and Homberg 2014) found that groups with balanced gender opportunities enhanced women's standing and somewhat reduced gender inequality, with working women carrying weight in the organization as human resources on par with men (Takeda & Homberg, 2014). Their analysis of 1,001 students across 192 groups showed that gender-balanced groups exhibit more equitable contributions to group work processes, although effects on final performance are mixed.

In reality, interviewees did not present strong indicators of gender-based conflict in the workplace, aside from isolated behaviors. Moreover, male participants tended not to acknowledge such dynamics explicitly, perhaps to avoid the implication of disparaging women. Gendered conflict may indeed occur in workplace settings, yet participants tended to discount its presence during research interviews.

9.3. Third theme: leadership at work and gender

Several interviewees stated that women's assumption of senior positions is normal, provided it is exercised within the bounds of delegated authority and established law. They noted no organizational barriers to promotion unless a woman herself becomes a barrier due to self-assessed constraints, such as the burdens and responsibilities that accompany leadership roles. For example, married women may face difficulties reconciling family and work because of accumulated pressures, whereas single working women, by contrast, tend to have greater flexibility owing to fewer pressures; the greater the pressure, the more it negatively impacts job performance.

Others—particularly women—observed that although there is competitive drive between the sexes to attain senior positions, many women prefer that men shoulder these responsibilities due to commitments that hinder their assumption of such roles. Some female participants indicated that women face issues of symbolic violence, not openly acknowledged—for example, contempt stemming from men's sense of pressure when women receive advantages not granted to them. Regarding pay, they confirmed that they are subject to salary deductions for absenteeism, unlike men.

Decision-making privileges are directly tied to the position held by either sex, as evidenced by men's lack of objection to being under a woman's authority when the law grants her that prerogative. Women's efforts are distributed among family, marital, and professional duties, which can impede their ability to perform optimally within the organization. They remain mentally and emotionally preoccupied with children and household responsibilities, and family members who exercise guardianship—such as a husband, brother, or father—may object to their pursuit of leadership posts. Leadership roles require mental and physical availability and often entail long hours or overtime that may be difficult to undertake. This does not cast doubt on women's administrative capabilities in senior roles—as most interviewees emphasized—but rather reflects role requirements that may hinder parity with men in professional settings. (Takeda & Homberg, 2014)

Some interviewees—especially women—noted that customs and traditions regard women's employment as a form of defiance against prevailing cultural and

social norms, despite their material contribution to the family. The roles society assigns to each sex often confine women to a narrow set of functions, primarily educational or care-related, whereas positions that place women in authority and elevate their status are deemed a masculine preserve. This indicates a relatively male-dominated professional domain, particularly in light of women's limited presence in decision-making roles compared to men.

Studies examining gender and socially preferred traits for men and women suggest that leadership is culturally coded as masculine, shaped by enduring values and stereotypes—especially in patriarchal contexts.

9.4. Fourth theme: communication channels in the organization and gender

Most interviewees—women and men—indicated that two types of communication occur among employees. The first is formal communication, which comprises the various functions and tasks conveyed by supervisors to subordinates to ensure the normal and lawful conduct of work, including the authority to issue directives and prohibitions when professional errors occur so that employees can correct them. The second is informal communication, evident in off-duty interactions between male and female employees and in covering for an absent colleague, particularly when aware of that colleague's social and economic circumstances. Under current conditions, reciprocal assistance and support outside formal structures are viewed as ordinary, familiar practices. These relations often extend beyond working hours and even after employment ends—such as upon retirement—through ongoing contact, especially on social occasions (e.g., exchanging congratulations). A sense of solidarity may surface in informal relations when workplace problems arise, as employees seek solutions without escalating issues to top management. By contrast, formal channels afford individuals a limited scope to enlist others' help in solving work problems; the supervisor in turn guides, evaluates, rewards, and disciplines employees as needed, and the formal channel clarifies assigned roles and tasks. In this regard, reference is made to the bureaucratic perspective that emphasizes strict division of labor and employees' adherence to the organization's formal rules and procedures. Within this framework, formal hierarchical communication includes upward flows—from frontline employees to supervisors and then to senior management—typically in the form of grievances, complaints, reports, opinions, and suggestions, thereby opening space for discussion, inquiry, and participation. Such flows also allow supervisors to gauge subordinates' attitudes and feelings and to disseminate information that leaders deem necessary.

Despite some cultural and social barriers, most interviewees did not perceive any inherent obstacle to the existence of an informal communication network and informal relations between the sexes—male and female employees—as

workplace contact inevitably generates such ties. Whereas cross-gender communication in formal contexts is bounded by legal necessity and lines of authority, informal communication, friendship, and collegiality between men and women emerge from diverse needs and interests. Although the broader public sphere may regard such relations as a challenge to prevailing values and reject them as compromising the perceived sanctity of place, the workplace constitutes a distinct domain generally removed from diffuse social surveillance.

Some female interviewees stated that informal communication with men is strictly prohibited for them, whether due to personal convictions or out of fear of patriarchal authority that imposes boundaries on women's relationships and determines with whom they may interact.

10. Study findings

In general, the variable of gender is evident in participants' representations of work relations, as indicated by markers such as acceptance of women's leadership, the emergence of male dominance, formal and informal communication channels, and organizational justice between the sexes. This supports the study's initial hypothesis, as reflected in the following points.

Work relations are influenced by the gender variable both positively and negatively.

Positive influence: manifested in cooperation and consultation between the sexes within the workplace, ensuring good interaction.

Negative influence: appears in the form of conflicts and misunderstandings between male and female employees, chiefly due to social, cultural, and even academic disparities.

A collegial, solidaristic work environment exists among employees (cooperation and consultation).

There are some indicators of conflict in the professional sphere, attributable to cultural and social differences and to divergent goals and interests by gender.

Positive work relations provide a comfortable and suitable atmosphere for completing tasks and delivering services.

Generally good communication and interaction are observed between male and female employees of similar professional level within the institution, both formally and informally.

Informal social relations exist within the institution, expressed through notions of fraternity, friendship, and collegiality.

Male dominance emerges in the workplace in both subtle and overt forms, through interactions, meanings, symbols, and language used among employees.

Working women are accepted in administrative professional settings after these had been the preserve of men by custom and tradition.

Women demonstrate the ability to assert their status, assume senior positions, and show dedication to work, despite the glass ceiling or cultural, social, and organizational barriers.

The formation of informal work groups that may include both sexes—men and women—stems from employees' cohesion, shared interests, and alignment in cultural, educational, and social levels.

11.Conclusion

topic of gender in the workplace is of significant importance and calls for sociological analysis and interpretation that can assist any organization, given that the human resource is the primary element for carrying out roles and tasks. Professional relations arise from interactions among employees, which can strengthen bonds and extend beyond the boundaries of the professional sphere into broader social relations. This creates a professional climate marked by cooperation, respect, and appreciation on the one hand, and by conflicts among employees (men and women) on the other—since conflict is a social process that occurs in the professional arena, and the presence of understanding does not imply the absence of conflict.

With the concerted efforts of the workforce, an organization can achieve its objectives while also meeting employees' needs. This study sought to underscore precisely this point: understanding gender from the standpoint of individuals' representations within the organization can help in grasping many sociocultural variables and essential social processes—such as conflict, cooperation, and competition—that are integral to organizational life.

Based on the study's relative findings, it is contended that understanding and analyzing the gender variable and linking it to other variables in the workplace contribute substantially to understanding an organization's structure and culture, while reinforcing the role of sociological analysis in examining such topics. Grasping the depth of representations and attitudes toward a given issue at the microsociological level can lead to broader understanding at the macrosociological level—particularly when the subject is studied and analyzed within its real social and cultural context, as workplaces vary from one society to another and from one institution to the next.

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