

The Role of Governmentality in the Construction of the Feminine Subject among Working Women.

سياسة الحكم و دورها في تكوين الذات الانثوية لدى المرأة العاملة¹

Imen Bouguesri ¹, Abdelghani Nait-Brahim ²

¹ جامعة عبد الحميد بن باديس، مستغانم، الجزائر i.bouguesri@gmail.com

² المدرسة الوطنية المتعددة التقنيات، وهران، الجزائر naitbra@yahoo.fr

تاريخ النشر: 2019/06/01

تاريخ القبول: 2019/05/20

تاريخ الإرسال: 2018/06/07

Abstract:

The individual can never exist and develop as subject outside societal institutions that constitute hotbeds for her/his formation.

This paper attempts to underscore the process of subject formation that working females undergo within the Algerian society. Two main institutions are involved: the family and the work market that systematically (co) operate in a seemingly individualistic guise (freedom, choice, ..) to eventually set the boundaries of the feminine self that unfolds common ideals and goals among women. Hence, the Foucauldian theory of governmentality is utilized to unearth the complicity among these disciplining institutions and their impact on women.

Keywords: governmentality, subject, femininity, work, family.

¹ Author correspondent: Imen Bouguesri i.bouguesri@gmail.com

ملخص:

إن الإنسان لا يمكنه أن يتكون كفرد إلا داخل مؤسسات مجتمعية فهي تشكل بيئة خصبة لممارسة السلطة عليه و تعتبر ذات تأثير محوري على تكوينه كفرد، ومن خلال هذا المقال، نحاول التطرق الى عملية تكوين المرأة العاملة كفرد يتأثر بمؤسستي الأسرة و العمل. حيث يركز هذين الأخيرين على مجموعة من الاستراتيجيات التي تستعمل الحرية الفردية والانجازات الفردية لتبني قواعد لأنوثة يجعل تطورها أو حتى تحريرها ضمن أسس و نظم مدروسة و مسطرة مسبقا. و عليه فقد عمدنا إلى استعمال نظرية ميشال فوكو المتمثلة في علاقات الهيمنة لإظهار دورها في الحفاظ على السلطة على الفرد رغم ما توحى به من إعطاء فضاء لحرية الفرد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهيمنة، الفردانية، الانوثة، العمل، الأسرة.

1. Introduction:

One of the most unsettled issues in gender and feminist research are the constructs of femininity and masculinity for they represent sites of constant transformation impacted and eventually shaped by a plethora of factors. The primary aim of the present paper is the formation of female subjects and the way their femininity is shaped and maintained in contemporary Algerian family. This discourse is devised within a new guise of ‘empowerment’ and ‘choice’ disseminated among young women setting a pathway to reach prearranged ends.

2. Conceptual Framework:

The major manipulating factors stressed in this work are patriarchy (within the family) and the consumerist culture (through the work market). At this level, the power interplay manifests itself as a disciplining strategy, which is what Foucault dubbed ‘strategies of governmentality’. For Foucault, government is the railway that orients and regulates the direction and impact of power, it is the “technology” that operates following a certain “rationality” to achieve a desired goal, e.g. political and religious power are technologies of power. Since power relations can be asymmetrical, these technologies

interfere to stabilize the imbalance resulting in the emergence of, in certain cases, a hierarchical state of dominance.

He assumes that governmentality bridges micro-level self-regulation with macro-level domination in an attempt to create a form of guidance that legitimizes itself using subjects' agreement and compliance to operate through their own actions.

The rise of a new form of 'normative femininity', as an increasingly anonymous and pervasive mode of discipline, operating to increase subjects' visibility and more dangerously drawing women into self-policing and self-disciplining that, in Foucault's words used by Bartky ¹, *assures the automatic functioning of power*. Hence, women become themselves the watchful eyes who control their own behavior leaving very little to blame on society.

This entails that regulating mechanisms are less about what women ought not to do and more about what they can do and how this can be exploited.

Delegating these roles to the female comes as a perfect match with the contemporary economically-oriented society (mass production and mass consumption) that utilizes the female to maintain high levels of consumption.

Governmentality is relayed through the functioning of three major mechanisms: the liberal aspect, pastoral power and security.

3. The Liberal Aspect:

A crucial aspect of liberalism is individualization, the subject is presented with a well-delineated space for action, choice and self-expression and then indulged into a process amenable to self-(re)formation. Within the family, it is true that women have access to a well-determined number of options; however, it allows a pathway for free action. This uncontrollable space of action consists the locus of power operation and thus the manipulation of individuals, who cannot be successfully governed without access to a certain level of freedom.

a. The Pastoral Power:

As women are inserted in diverse positions within the household, they are attributed regulating roles to be applied on other females to render them responsible for adjusting their conduct in accordance with the prescribed patriarchal discursive constructions of gendered subjectivity. This technique however, relies on three major principles to function; firstly, “the analytical responsibility”, secondly “exhaustive and instantaneous transfer”, thirdly, “sacrificial reversal,” and finally “alternate correspondence”.

b. Security:

It deals with the possible events following an act and presenting the most appropriate and acceptable one, from a patriarchal perspective, within a range of allowable actions, for the sake of managing any concomitant risks from a wrong decision and that may engender any malfunctioning of the gender order. Foucault attributed three main characteristics to this technique: *Firstly, it deals with series of possible and probable events; secondly, it evaluates through the calculation of comparative cost; and thirdly, it prescribes “not by absolute binary demarcation between the permitted and the forbidden, but by the specification of an optimal mean within a tolerable bandwidth of variation”* (Gordon, 1991, p. 20)².

4. Method and Materials:

Personal semi-structured interviews were utilized with a group of n=10 working females.

The respondents occupy positions of high school teachers and were selected based on a simple random sampling technique, five of them live in Mascara city and five live in the suburbs.

In operationalizing the theoretical constructs (variables) we opted for two indicators (in two questions) for each variable. The pastoral power was measured through the role of in-laws or parents in the adjustment of female behavior, as to the liberal aspect, we measured the availability of activities to the subjects, and the attitudes that form their self-image. Security was measured by means of mobility and filial protection.

5. Results:

The demographic information about the respondents are displayed in table (4.1). As presented, the sample is dominated by young women, since 50% of the respondents' age ranges from 24 to 29 years old and the second half between 32 and 48. Five of them are married, three single and two divorced providing a variety of experiences and perspectives.

Respondent	Age	Marital status
R1	32	Married
R2	45	Married
R3	36	Married
R4	27	Married
R5	48	Divorced
R6	24	Single
R7	45	Married
R8	25	Single
R9	29	Divorced
R10	28	Single

Table (4.1): Respondents' Demographic Information.

To excavate the process of subject formation, the three strategies of governmentality have been empirically analyzed using open-ended questions:

5.1. The Pastoral Power:

A respondent claimed living in a household where individuals are deeply invested into mutual service, regulation and care to ensure the smooth circulation of interests.

Extracts:

“My mother-in law distributes the tasks and keeps an eye on us, she does not miss any detail on our behavior and relationship among each other, she even plans for our lives...”

Participant 1, married, aged 32.

As a corrective behavior, it is often delegated to the parents, a religious authority or a counselor.

“The closest person to me is my father, I consult him and he constantly advises me on many issues and he makes sure I do the right thing.”

Participant 6, single, aged 27.

The same process occurs at the macro level, the state apparatuses aim at providing services to secure the subjects’ needs, how these needs are obtained, their amount, how they are used and whether they should be elevated to a higher quality is determined by the governing force.

5.2. The Liberal Aspect:

The respondents have restrained the meaning of liberty in self-care activities and mobility:

Extracts:

“ I don’t like to be downgraded by people, especially as a working female, and besides, I’m a woman, so I have to take care of my look...”

Respondent 8, aged 25, single.

“It is necessary that women take care of themselves...after all what we face at work and at home, we need some time for ourselves, That’s why a group of friends and myself often decide to take some time out, ...and besides, if I get all the housework done before I go, my husband turns a blind eye to it.”

Respondent 3, aged 36, married.

“My life is so busy, you know... when you are married you have many priorities, I have a lot of tasks to do at home and outside, so, it’s very difficult for me to find time for myself.”

Respondent 2, aged 45, married.

Within this confessional space, it is clear that women exhibit a determination to ascertain their own feminine territory, to labor into finding an outlet for the day-to-day pressure. In this case the apparatuses of governmentality are the entertainment facilities that unfortunately represent a concealed solace convincingly appearing as a free choice that eventually drags these women into the abyss of consumerism and an endless void ripping them off their true selfhood and facilitating their regulation into an imposed form of normative femininity.

5.3. Security:

At this level, the respondents were asked questions about what they gave in exchange for their freedom of movement, the shared attitude was characterized by a general agreement that all the “restrictive” measures taken in their regard were “protective or preventative” in a society still governed by patriarchal rule. They reported their awareness of the possible consequences of deviant behavior and therefore remaining cautious with their actions.

Extracts:

“ I am allowed mobility outside the house but with conditions, I have to wear the face veil, and sometimes be accompanied by a relative.”

Respondent 2 , aged 45 , married.

“ as far as I keep my husband informed about where I go and as he takes me and picks me up, he’s fine with it.”

Respondent 7, aged 45, married.

“It’s a matter of trust between couples, I live in the suburb and I work in the city, and I am encouraged by my husband to work and be self-fulfilling”

Respondent 4, aged 27, married.

“My outdoor movement is my business, nobody interferes in it as far as I respect the norms of my community, and I think that women are more liberated nowadays, they do a lot more activities outside the house than inside.”

Respondent 6, aged 24, married.

6. Discussion:

The surveyed women reflect a shared longing for a particular image of femininity to which the path is already paved through the plethora of instruments made available by the culture of consumerism and confirmed by the patriarchal feminine model. They are now leaning toward the perfect body shape, the most fashionable outfit, that make these women the slaves of the culture of consumerism par excellence.

The discourse of liberation that women are called upon in our society sets them as objects and utilizes women's agentic expression for self-monitoring. Work and education have created a space for women to demarcate their own structures reclaiming the physical environment, gaining more ground and taking responsibility for their own choices. Yet, it contributes to ever more dangerous anxieties and injuries.

7. Conclusion:

In this paper, we attempted to elucidate the function of the family as a fundamental instrument in the formation of individual subjects. It is a normalizing gaze so skillfully transplanting the disciplining formula from the system into the self by subjecting it to an auto-surveillance process that ensures its reproduction and continuation. It reflects the intersection between the macro and the micro levels of gendered practices and interactions, as referred to by Dean ³ “a governmental self-formation”, despite the fact that these processes have offered women new pathways for emancipation.

Forms of gender regulation will never cease to appear and reappear, disguised under new shapes or transmogriphy to become more difficult to discern.

Notwithstanding, the disciplining power has never existed as a fully established sovereign, resistance occupies a large

share of the negotiation process. It is circular and pervasive allowing the individual the possibility of exercising and resisting it.

Appendix :

Interview Protocol:

Introduction:

My name is Imene BOUGUESRI, I am a PhD student and I am doing research on the construction of femininity among working females.

At the outset, I would like to inform you that the interview is audio recorded.

There are two set of questions, personal information and open-ended questions on the topic of the research. Feel free to ask for any clarification.

A. Personal information:

Your age:.....

Your marital status:.....

B. Open-ended questions:

1. How can you describe your relationship with members of your family?

- Possible probes:

Is there a significant member who seems to have influence on the others? Why?

2. As a working woman, do you dedicate some time for yourself?

- Possible probes:

How do you spend it?

Are there any activities that make you feel more feminine?

3. Is there any restriction on your movement outside the house?
 - Possible probes: What are the reasons for that?
How do you negotiate to get agreement for it?

References

- 1- Michel Foucault, 1977. *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, London: Allen Lane, P, 149
- 2- Colin Gordon, Graham Burchell. Peter Miller, 1991. *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. University of Chicago Press, P, 20.
- 3- Mitchell Dean, 1994. *Critical and Effective Histories: Foucault's Methods and Historical Sociology*. Routledge

Bibliography :

- 1- Dean, Mitchell. 1994. *Critical and Effective Histories: Foucault's Methods and Historical Sociology*. Routledge.
- 2- Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, London: Allen Lane.
- 3- Gordon, Colin. Burchell. Graham. Miller, Peter. 1991. *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. University of Chicago Press.