

The Disintegration of Traditional Bonds and the Reshaping of Family Values under Urban Expansion in Algeria

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Abstract

This study addresses the profound structural transformations within the Algerian social fabric and the repercussions of rapid urban expansion on family stability through a sociological approach that explores the interaction between physical space and value-based practices. It aims to analyze how the transition from traditional housing to modern residential patterns affects the nature of intergenerational relationships and their reflection on the values of solidarity and privacy, with a focus on spatial factors leading to the disintegration of the extended family and the restructuring of roles within the nuclear family.

The findings of the study revealed that urban transformations have produced a complex social reality, contributing to the reinforcement of individual independence and the improvement of housing conditions, while simultaneously leading to the decline of traditional family support networks and the growing sense of isolation within modern neighborhoods. This, in turn, confirmed the importance of integrating the social dimension into urban policies in a manner that contributes to achieving a balance between the requirements of modernity and the preservation of solidarity ties, as well as ensuring a stable family environment within the context of current urban transformations.

Keywords: Family Values, Urban Expansion, Traditional Bonds, Nuclear Family, Social Fabric.

Introduction

Family values represent the reference system that frames social relations and defines the roles of individuals within the social fabric. These values are not fixed; rather, they are influenced by the surrounding spatial context. Urban space is not merely a physical container for the family, but a social actor that contributes to shaping lifestyles and the nature of relationships among individuals. With the rapid acceleration of urbanization in Algeria, these values have come to experience a complex dynamism manifested in the transition from the “extended family” model associated with traditional housing to the “nuclear family” model associated

with modern housing, thereby imposing a reconsideration of the concepts of solidarity, privacy, and gender roles within the Algerian household.

The transformations affecting the family structure in Algeria are not merely responses to general economic factors; rather, they are a direct outcome of urban expansion policies and collective housing production. The transition from the traditional house with a shared courtyard to the closed vertical apartment brought about a radical change in the nature of daily interaction among generations, where the role of neighborhood relations and the extended family as a social safety network declined, while the values of individualism and independence emerged. These spatial transformations not only altered the distribution of roles within the family, but also imposed new challenges related to social cohesion, the feeling of isolation in modern neighborhoods, and the management of conflicts and psychological support among individuals. This raises the question of whether this transformation represents a “disintegration” of bonds or a “functional adaptation” to the demands of the modern city.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to analyze the nature of the relationship between urban expansion and the reshaping of family values in Algeria, and to explore the dimensions of this transformation by clarifying the depth of the social impacts of urban space. It also questions whether these transformations may be considered an inevitable necessity imposed by the dynamics of urban modernization, or whether they require a restructuring of housing and social policies to ensure a balance between the demands of modern life and the preservation of solidarity ties, thereby guaranteeing the stability of the Algerian family amidst current urban transformations.

First: The Conceptual and Theoretical Framework of Family Values in the Urban Context

The fundamental concepts in this study represent the methodological gateway to understanding the nature of the transformation experienced by the Algerian family. They are not merely theoretical narratives, but tools for disentangling the relationship between physical space and the value system. Therefore, the following concepts will be addressed in a manner that serves the issue of urban expansion and its impact on the family structure.

1. The Concept of Family Values

1.1 The Concept of Values

Values are considered one of the central concepts in sociology, as they constitute the normative guidelines that regulate individuals’ behavior and organize their interactions within the social space. The sociologist Émile Durkheim provided a foundational definition of values, considering them a product of the collective consciousness rather than mere individual preferences. They are ideals and abstract ideas reflecting the supreme goals of society. Durkheim argues that society is the primary guardian of these values, as it defines moral standards and directs individuals toward compliance with them, thereby making them a “social fact” external to the individual and endowed with coercive power.

From this perspective, moral values do not originate from the individual himself; rather, society is regarded as their primary source, and they are formed as a result of prevailing social, cultural, and spatial factors. Accordingly, values are not fixed entities but are subject to transformation with changes in the social structure. Every society possesses its own moral system embodied

in its institutions, especially in the division of labor and housing patterns, where morality constitutes one of the pillars upon which society relies in regulating relations among its members (Haddad & Abdel Nasser, 2021, p. 711).

Within the context of our study, this concept acquires particular importance, since urban transformation in Algeria has not only altered the physical form of the city, but has also affected the value system governing relationships within this space.

1.2. The Concept of Family

The family represents the fundamental nucleus of society and the most important institution of socialization. However, its form and functions differ according to the urban context. Anthony Giddens defines the family as a group of individuals connected by direct kinship ties, with adult members assuming responsibility for raising children. Giddens clearly distinguishes between the concept of the “nuclear family” (parents and their children) and the “extended family” (which includes other relatives living under one roof or maintaining continuous daily relations) (Triki, 2017, p. 79).

In the Algerian context, the family cannot be understood separately from the “housing” that accommodates it. Historically, the Algerian family has been characterized by an extended nature, combining both nuclear and extended patterns, particularly within the traditional urban fabric (ksour, old neighborhoods, and rural areas), which allows grandparents, uncles, and children to reside in one house or in adjacent dwellings.

The researcher Boutefnouchet pointed out that Algerians often do not strictly distinguish between the concepts of “family” and “household.” When defining the family, reference may be made either to the nuclear family or to the extended family that includes relatives in the “large house” among urban residents or the “large tent” among nomads (Boualcherch, 2019, p. 12). However, modern urban expansion and the dominance of vertical housing patterns (apartments) have imposed a new reality in which physical space can no longer accommodate the extended family, thereby promoting the dominance of the nuclear family model. This transformation was not merely formal, but also affected the economic, social, and religious functions of the family and even altered the nature of individuals’ social identity and legitimacy within society, where social control shifted from the “extended family” to the “state and institutions” in the modern urban space.

1.3. Definition of Family Values

Family values constitute one of the fundamental dimensions of social values. They are the principles and standards that regulate relations among family members and guide their roles and behaviors in various life situations within the living space. The most prominent traditional family values in Algerian society include obedience to parents, extended family solidarity, participation in collective decision-making, and refraining from independence from the family home except when necessary.

However, these values have undergone noticeable changes in light of social and urban developments. The decline of the model of absolute “paternal authority,” the emergence of values of “individual privacy” within modern housing, and the transformation of women’s roles due to education and participation in the labor market have all reshaped the value map (Haddad & Abdel Nasser, 2021, p. 713). Researcher Mohamed Taher Bouchlouch argues that family values are characterized by diversity and overlap with broader social values. The family is not

an isolated entity; rather, it is the fundamental social unit that preserves social heritage and transmits morals and values across generations (Chaouia & Meddah, 2019, p. 111).

Yet, the central question in our study is: how is this heritage reproduced within a new urban space? Family values encompass multiple dimensions such as care, love, and constructive ideas, but the embodiment of these values is inevitably influenced by the nature of the space. Values once practiced within the “shared courtyard” differ in their practice within the “closed apartment,” reflecting the organic interconnection between the family, society, and the space that unites them.

2. Factors Influencing the Transformation of Family Values

The profound transformation in the value system of the Algerian family cannot be understood in isolation from the context of urban expansion and the accompanying economic and social structures. The weakening of family ties is no longer merely a superficial phenomenon; rather, it is the result of structural transformations associated with the decline of the family model based on collective cohesion and its transition toward a more individualistic model, especially since family belonging has become conditioned by the extent to which individuals achieve self-realization within the family rather than by its existence as a unit founded on spontaneous solidarity (Haddad & Abdel Nasser, 2021, p. 715). This transformation became particularly evident through the spatial factor, as the transition from open traditional housing to closed urban patterns reinforced the value of privacy at the expense of daily solidarity, which in turn weakened the symbolic authority of the extended family in favor of external institutions competing in shaping social consciousness (Belmadi, 2016, p. 06).

Parallel to this spatial transformation, the economics of the modern city and the requirements of daily life imposed the necessity of redefining gender roles. The distribution of responsibilities is no longer based on the binary model of the breadwinning man and the caregiving woman; rather, it has become subject to continuous negotiation between material partnership and social pressures, creating a state of fragile balance in societies that have not yet produced a balanced value model between women’s empowerment and family stability (Baghzim & Ben Saadi, 2020, p. 514).

At the value level, there is a clear connection between the decline of conservative values and the reengineering of family ethics under the pressure of individualism and market values that elevate self-independence. Family stability is no longer perceived as a sacred social objective, but has become linked to the extent to which individuals achieve their personal ambitions, which has resulted in increasing rates of family disintegration.

Digital transformations and modern technology have also contributed significantly to deepening this crisis. They have functioned as tools that increase levels of isolation within the shared space, thereby weakening direct social interaction that had previously been compensated for through the gathering of the extended family, leaving behind a form of psychological disintegration among family members even while living under the same roof (Tabchouch & Mezouach, 2022, p. 51).

These intertwined transformations are not temporary changes, but rather a radical shift in the social structure of the family, turning it into a changing entity governed by new equations associated with modern lifestyles. This calls, within the sociological context, for a profound reconsideration of contemporary family models in order to understand how family values are

being reshaped under these transformations and the extent of their impact on social stability in general.

3. Prominent Characteristics of Modern Family Values

The prominent characteristics of modern family values in Algeria do not appear merely as an abstract cultural transformation, but as a direct outcome of the interaction between the family and the expanding urban space. The most significant features of this value transformation can be observed through the following analytical points:

- **The dominance of individualism and the independence of the nuclear family:**
The growth of individualistic tendencies under modern housing patterns has led to the restructuring of family ties, as the focus on self-realization and personal independence has become a priority in family decisions (Doudah & Maqri, 2017, p. 176). Individuals no longer engage with the extended family with the same previous depth; rather, the spatial constraints of vertical housing have imposed the dominance of the nuclear family, producing new patterns based on negotiation and adaptation instead of strict adherence to collective traditions that prevailed in traditional housing.
- **The restructuring of gender roles:**
Family roles have undergone notable transformations due to the pressures of the urban labor market and the rise of demands for equality. The traditional division of labor is no longer based on rigid hierarchy; instead, women have become essential actors in the family economy to cope with the requirements of urban life. This transformation has allowed the redefinition of responsibilities within the family and enabled the emergence of flexible family patterns seeking to reconcile work and childcare, which has affected the quality of family life and reshaped the concept of parental responsibility away from the unilateral model (Triki, 2017, p. 81).
- **The transformation of paternal authority toward a negotiated model:**
Modern family relations have become increasingly based on principles of democratic upbringing founded on dialogue rather than traditional paternal authority, reflecting a clear change in the power structure within the family. Children have become partners in certain decision-making processes in a manner that fosters their intellectual independence (Boualcherch, 2019, p. 16). However, this transformation has also created generational gaps and difficulties in imposing traditional value norms amid parents' preoccupation with the demands of rapid urban life.
- **The dual impact of digitalization on internal interaction:**
The digital revolution has contributed to reshaping patterns of interaction within the family, as technology has become an important medium of communication, generating new forms of distant family relations. At the same time, it has reduced the presence of direct interaction within the domestic space itself. Consequently, new challenges have emerged concerning the reconstruction of the concept of family stability and the achievement of balance between the digital world and real-life communication (Al-Zahrani, 2014, p. 215).
- **Changing standards of marriage and emotional partnership:**
Urban cultural and economic changes have influenced standards of marriage and family formation, as marriage has come to be viewed as a partnership based on emotional and

intellectual compatibility rather than merely a social obligation. Higher levels of education and financial independence, particularly among women, have contributed to delaying the age of marriage and altering criteria for partner selection, producing new family models based more on partnership than submission to traditional standards (Tabchouch & Mezouach, 2022, p. 55). This represents a fundamental transformation in the value system under the pressure of modern urbanization.

Second: The Transformation of Neighborhood Relations and Their Repercussions on Family Support Networks in Modern Neighborhoods

The dynamics of the contemporary Algerian family cannot be separated from the spatial environment that contains it, particularly the nature of neighborhood relations that constitute the natural extension of family ties. Historically, “neighborhood” within the traditional Algerian urban fabric was not merely a spatial relationship between adjacent residents, but rather a functional social system that can be described as “kinship neighborhood,” where the boundaries of the family overlapped with those of the neighborhood, and where the neighbor was often a relative by blood or marriage, thereby creating an automatic social safety network (Jbayli, 2014, p. 17). However, the policies of rapid urban expansion in Algeria, accompanied by the massive production of collective vertical housing and large suburban neighborhoods, led to a clear transformation in this structure, shifting from a “neighborhood of solidarity” to a “neighborhood of residence,” which negatively affected traditional family support networks.

In the traditional urban model, neighborhood functions extended to include explicit family roles. The neighbor participated in social occasions, provided support during crises, and acted as a “second eye” in caring for children and the elderly within open shared spaces such as alleys and squares. This spatial proximity allowed the circulation of social capital among extended families, as mothers found support among neighboring women for temporary childcare, while heads of households found support among neighbors during emergencies (Triki, 2017, p. 419). In contrast, modern neighborhoods, with their closed urban design characterized by isolated apartments, armored doors, and private elevators, imposed a culture of “absolute privacy” that gradually evolved into “voluntary isolation.” The architectural separation between housing units reduced opportunities for spontaneous interaction and transformed neighborly relations into purely contractual relationships based on respecting boundaries and noninterference, thereby severing the arteries of informal support upon which the Algerian family had traditionally relied.

The repercussions of this transformation are clearly visible at the level of internal family support networks. With the decline of the supportive role of neighbors, the nuclear family has become solely burdened with social care responsibilities that were previously shared with the extended neighborhood and family network (Jbayli, 2017, p. 19). For example, many working mothers in major cities have been compelled to rely on paid childcare centers or domestic help instead of neighboring women or relatives, increasing the economic burdens on the family and altering the nature of the mother-child relationship. Likewise, elderly care, which was once naturally provided within the home or with the assistance of nearby neighbors, now faces significant challenges in modern neighborhoods due to children’s preoccupation and the

geographical distance between relatives, raising a new social issue concerning the fate of the elderly under accelerated urbanization.

Furthermore, the collapse of the traditional neighborhood network has deprived the family of the “informal social control” once provided by the neighborhood. Previously, neighbors exercised a form of moral supervision that protected family cohesion and limited deviant behavior. Today, however, the anonymity characterizing large neighborhoods has granted individuals broader freedoms, but at the same time increased the family’s sense of fragility and insecurity within its private space. This reality has produced a condition of “spatial disintegration” translated into “functional disintegration,” as the family can no longer depend on its immediate environment during difficult times, thereby reinforcing the values of individualism and self-reliance at the expense of collective solidarity values (Joudi & Ali Taleb, 2022, p. 311). Consequently, the transformation in neighborhood relations is not merely a change in patterns of acquaintance among residents, but rather a decisive factor in reshaping the structure of the Algerian family, pushing it from the model of the “family open to the neighborhood” toward the model of the “family closed upon itself,” which partially explains the decline of extended solidarity values and the rise of isolated lifestyles in contemporary Algerian cities.

Third: Public Spaces as a Functional Alternative to Traditional Extended Family Spaces

The transformation in the nature of spaces that host family interaction constitutes one of the most prominent manifestations of the reshaping of family values in Algeria. The “home,” in its traditional meaning, is no longer the sole setting for practices of solidarity and family communication. Within the traditional urban fabric, the “courtyard” or “hawsh” represented the beating heart of the extended family: an open shared space bringing generations together under one roof, where daily rituals were practiced, including collective meals, evening gatherings, and shared childcare (Abed & Medane, 2022, p. 537). However, the transition to closed modern housing (apartments) within the framework of urban expansion led to the disappearance of this intermediary space between the private and the public, creating a void that families sought to fill by resorting to public spaces as a strategic alternative for practicing new forms of interaction.

Public spaces in contemporary Algerian cities—such as public parks, shopping malls, beaches, and family cafés—have emerged as functional substitutes for the courtyard of the traditional house, yet they embody profound value transformations. Shopping malls, for example, are no longer merely places of consumption, but have become spaces for weekly gatherings where Algerian families dedicate time to collective outings for shopping and dining in an attempt to restore the spirit of “family gathering” lost within narrow housing spaces (Qasimi, 2011, p. 58). Nevertheless, this alternative differs fundamentally from the traditional space, as it is based on “paid consumption” rather than “spontaneous generosity,” and on “temporary privacy” within a public setting rather than “permanent openness” within a private one. This transformation has altered the dynamics of family interaction, making relationships practiced within specific temporal and spatial frameworks instead of forming a continuous daily fabric as they did in the traditional model.

At the level of gender dynamics, modern public spaces have provided Algerian women with new opportunities to exercise their family roles outside the walls of the home, thereby reinforcing values of independence and social presence. Children's parks and family playgrounds have become spaces where mothers perform caregiving roles away from domestic isolation, while simultaneously allowing them to interact with other mothers and thus rebuild informal support networks as alternatives to kinship-based neighborhood relations. Yet this openness has also encountered challenges related to the design of these spaces and their suitability to local family culture (Ben Ramadan, 2013, p. 153). Many public parks in Algerian cities suffer from neglect or insecurity, pushing families toward costly commercial spaces, which in turn deepens class disparities in exercising the right to the city and healthy family interaction.

Moreover, the shift toward public spaces has affected mechanisms for transmitting values between generations. In the traditional courtyard, children learned the values of solidarity and respect through observation and direct participation in the rituals of the extended family under the supervision of grandparents. In modern public spaces, however, interaction has become more fragmented: children are occupied with amusement games, adolescents separate into shopping areas, and adults sit in cafés, thereby reducing opportunities for deep family dialogue and the direct transmission of value heritage. This reality partially explains the rise of "individualistic" values within the same family, even during collective activities, as each individual becomes immersed in his or her own world within the shared space.

Furthermore, the issue of the "enclosure" of public spaces and their transformation into consumer-oriented spaces raises a profound problem; malls and family cafés now impose material conditions for entry (purchasing power), which has made the practice of solidaristic family values dependent on economic capacity (Rammach & Belqacemi, 2022, p.177). Whereas family visits in the traditional model relied on generosity and hospitality regardless of material status, family gatherings in modern spaces have become linked to the ability to pay, where the logic of the market has penetrated the very heart of family relations. This transformation clearly reflects how the reconfiguration of family values in Algeria is not merely a cultural response, but a direct outcome of the nature of spaces produced by the modern city, which in turn reproduces new patterns of interaction based on consumption and temporary privacy rather than spontaneous solidarity and permanent openness.

Accordingly, public spaces cannot be considered a full alternative or equivalent to traditional extended-family spaces; rather, they are compensatory spaces that carry within themselves the seeds of value transformation. On the one hand, they allow the nuclear family to practice new forms of cohesion, and on the other hand, they accelerate the decline of the traditional pattern of extended solidarity. This reality calls on urban policymakers in Algeria to reconsider the design of public spaces, making them more accommodating to multi-generational family interaction and more consistent with solidaristic values that still constitute part of the social identity of the Algerian family, so that the modern city does not become a space that filters values instead of embracing their balanced transformation.

Fourth: Recommendations and Proposals

1. Adopting a model of “value-sensitive urban planning”: a call to move from a policy of “quantitative housing production” to a policy of “social space production,” where in the design of new neighborhoods, semi-private shared spaces within residential complexes are allocated to allow neighborhood interaction without compromising the privacy of the nuclear family.
2. Rehabilitation of public spaces to support family cohesion: the need to design public parks and recreational areas in a way that serves multi-generational interaction; by providing safe seating areas for the elderly to sit and communicate, and play areas for children under the visual supervision of families, thereby restoring the function of “informal social control” and reducing family isolation in apartments.
3. Encouraging flexible housing patterns that accommodate the extended family: proposing new housing models (such as adjacent apartments with connecting doors, or housing units that can be separated and combined) that allow the extended family to live in spatial proximity while maintaining functional independence, thus preserving traditional support networks within urbanization.
4. Strengthening “urban life socialization” programs: developing awareness and training programs for families who have recently moved from rural areas or traditional neighborhoods to modern housing, to help them understand the dynamics of urban life and how to rebuild support and neighborhood networks in the new space, in order to reduce the shock of transition and social isolation.
5. Deepening comparative field studies: calling for sociological field studies comparing family value patterns in traditional neighborhoods (Casbah, old districts) and modern neighborhoods (towers, suburbs), using mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative) to measure more precisely the impact of spatial variables on indicators such as solidarity, privacy, and roles.
6. Integrating the sociological dimension into the training of engineers and planners: recommending the inclusion of educational modules in architecture and urban planning institutes on “sociology of space” and “the social needs of the Algerian family,” to ensure that urban planners are aware of the social consequences of their design decisions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study confirms that urban space is not a neutral container, but a social actor that has reshaped family values in Algeria; the shift from traditional to vertical housing has imposed the dominance of the nuclear family and values of privacy at the expense of extended solidarity. Despite the individual autonomy achieved by this transformation, it has weakened supportive neighborhood networks and deepened social isolation within modern neighborhoods. Therefore, ensuring the future stability of the Algerian family does not lie in returning to the past, but in adopting value-sensitive urban policies that balance the requirements of modernity with the necessities of belonging, to ensure a balanced urban transformation that preserves the social fabric without stagnation.

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