

## **Chapter #: The Transformation of Youth Cultural Norms and Values. A Gendered Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

The chapter reflects on the changes and continuities in the cultural norms and values related to gender roles, gender relations and the family, as expressed and lived by young men and women in five countries: Algeria, Morocco, Lebanon, Tunisia and Egypt. In doing so, the chapter focusses on the processes and practices of cultural innovation emerging among young Arab Mediterranean generations after the 2011 uprisings. The empirical analysis presented in the chapter relies on qualitative and quantitative data collected through an international youth survey and a multisite ethnographic fieldwork (SAHWA Youth Survey & Ethnographic Fieldwork 2016). Young people emerge as social actors able to cope with structural limitations and mechanisms of exclusion. At the same time, the analysis shows the different way of inhabiting the ambivalent condition of “waithood” by young women and young men in the region.

**Key words:** Youth; Gender; Agency; Cultural Innovation; Cultural Norms; Arab Mediterranean Countries.

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## **1. Introduction**

This chapter focusses on the processes and practices of cultural innovation emerging among young Arab Mediterranean generations during the recent years and particularly after the 2011 uprisings. If cultural innovation is a process that redefines dominant representations of reality, identities, and agency, this process is shaped by time – that is by the relations between past, present and future. It is fundamental to bear in mind that preserving or innovating, and choosing continuity over discontinuity, implies putting in relation these three temporal dimensions. As a matter of fact, in order to create a capacity for innovation, it is necessary to begin from pre-existent visions of the world that need to be re-elaborated and revised to make sense in the present. The past is the starting point, the present opens up new possibilities and prefigures the future, the new world of choices one aspires to bring about. Taking into consideration this temporal framework, our analysis examines more specifically the transformations of youth's cultural values and attitudes toward gender norms and relations through a comparative and gendered perspective. This means that our approach emphasises the impact that gender – conceived as a social construction that includes norms, values and modes of social organisation – has on girls' and boys' attitudes towards issues such as the role of men and women in society, politics, and the family, or the expected notions of femininity and masculinity they adhere to.

Such notions and approaches do not happen in vacuum, in fact they are influenced by broader political, economic, social structures. It follows that this chapter discusses the transformation of gender norms and values as they happen within such broader structures, which are characterised by multiple mechanisms of exclusion and marginalisation of the youth at the social, political, economic and cultural levels. It is not surprising, then, that the notion of 'waithood' is often recalled to describe the condition of suspension and marginality the youth in Arab Mediterranean Countries (AMC) live. However, taking social innovation and its temporal framework as a reference point, the very notion of waithood

opens the door to agency and the possibilities of processes of social change steered towards empowerment. Such waithood originates from adverse structural circumstances (*in primis* the high level of youth unemployment) and limits the opportunity of young people to transiting towards an adult life but, at the same time, it stimulates subjective strategies of resistance and creativity. As numerous analyses have shown (Martin Munoz, 2000; Bourdarbat and Ajbilou, 2007; Silver, 2007; Egel and Salehi-Isfahani, 2007), the condition of social marginalisation lived by young people in AMC – that assumes different forms from a general distrust in society and its institutions, to disaffection to politics, delay in the transition to adulthood and lack of social recognition – does not equate with a passive stance.

The analysis presented in this chapter aligns with this literature, demonstrating that young people emerge as social actors able to act within an unfavourable social context and against all odds. They deploy diverse strategies and forms of resistance to cope with structural limitations and pursue their life projects, goals and choices. However, we also avoid consider the AM youth as champions of the revolution and social change – the narrative alternative to the waithood-related passivity. Rather, we locate young people's capabilities and agency in specific context, bounding them to the actual social condition they experience.

This perspective leads to an enrichment and re-signification of the concept of waithood, which becomes ambivalent and even contradictory when it comes to gender norms and relations. Indeed, while it challenges the young people's linear (and expectedly so) transition to adulthood, at the same time it includes the possibility for innovating practices and roles, as the young people involved in the SAHWA research project explain. On the one hand, they refer to and trust gender traditional norms and values as a form of protection in times of social and ontological uncertainty, contributing to reinforce them; on the other, they struggle against traditional and patriarchal social and cultural order, giving rise to innovative social practices and engendering cultural innovation.

Such 'paradoxical' effect of waithood is at the core of our examination, as it forcefully plays out when it comes to the views and experience of young women and men of their life conditions. In fact, such views and experience vary dramatically when women or men are considered. The slowing down of the transition to adulthood (whose main aspect is delayed marriages) for young women involved in the research facilitates investments in

education (especially for young women of urban middle class), encourages professional fulfilment and, in general, opens up new cultural horizons and expectations in terms of gender roles and relationships, as well as of women's innovative role in the public sphere and politics. Nevertheless, such expectations barely find realisation in reality. Scant job opportunity, a plague affecting young people in general, is particularly real for young women, a reality that pushes them back into traditional gender hierarchies and roles. A similar paradoxical outcome concerns young men too. Though more educated than in the past and generally favouring gender equality, they suffer from social pressure to form their own family and provide for it.

Our analysis does not only highlight such paradoxes, but also captures their innovative potentiality in the field of gender norms and relations, which is linked to the interaction between agency and structure. In order to do so, the chapter relies on qualitative and quantitative data collected during the research project SAHWA in Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia<sup>1</sup>.

The chapter develops as follows. First, it contextualises this analysis in the current literature on changes in values and cultural norms among the youth in AMC. Secondly, it examines the empirical findings collected through the ethnographic fieldwork and surveys in the countries mentioned above, focussing in particular on equal opportunities in education and the labour market, women and men's political participation and gender roles and relations within the family and the public sphere. The chapter then will conclude proposing a reflection on the sociological concept of cultural innovation intertwined with that of gender.

## **2. Youth values, marginalisation and agency in AMC**

The study of the youth in Arab Mediterranean countries has become a crucial area of interest for scholars and policy-makers during the past decades, and more so after the so-called Arab Spring and the protest movements that sprung out of the mobilisations of 2010-2011. Academics and researchers have analysed Arab Mediterranean youth's attitudes, values and cultural norms with a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods, generally presenting a rather depressing picture. In fact, the contradiction between the large number of youth and the little opportunity they have in terms of employment and, more generally speaking, economic and social satisfaction, have led scholars to understand the youth's life conditions

in terms of deprivation and social exclusion (Martin Munoz, 2000; Bourdarbat and Ajbilou, 2007; Silver, 2007; Egel and Salehi-Isfahani, 2007), originating two dominant representations.

On the one side, we have representations focusing on the potential threat that this disenfranchised youth may embody, with research discussing topics such as radicalism and political violence (Al-Momani, 2011; LaGraffe, 2012). On the other side, we have a narrative focused on the notion of 'waithood', identifying a condition in which young people do not have the resources to proceed with their life and transit from childhood and adolescence to adulthood (Dhillon and Yousef, 2009; Singerman, 2007). Scholarly investigation have in particular focused on the inability and impossibility for young people to acquire a stable employment position, preferably in the public sector, which in turn hampers their ability to afford marriage and, consequently, have kids. In other words, to enter adulthood (Mulderig, 2013). Because of this inability of fulfilling the social role that the youth are expected to perform in order to be part of the society of adults, they become 'stuck in transition', unable to complete their journey from one life stage to the other. They are therefore trapped in waithood, an extendible time of uncertainty for productive employment, housing, marriage and family formation, which are the socio-economic benchmarks that have traditionally defined adult status in the Middle East (Hoodfar, 1997).

Both representations present some elements of truth, but tend to homogenise and emphasise some aspects of young people's life conditions despite others may be in place or even more relevant. Manata Hashemi (2017), for instance, discusses how class politics plays an important role in diversifying the youth's experience with waithood, as poorer youth relies more easily on the informal job market to become active economic agents. She also argues that the representation of the Middle Eastern youth in terms of disenfranchised and therefore radical subjects only find scant empirical evidences. A large literature argues that poverty and lack of opportunity breed ignorance and extreme worldviews (Ismail, 2003; Khashan, 2003; Kouaouci, 2004; Moaddel and Karabenick, 2008; Salehi-Isfahani, 2008), but little evidence exists for this (Bayat and Dennis, 2000; Krueger, 2007; Esposito and Mogahed, 2007). In fact, as highlighted by Silver (2007), Egel and Salehi-Isfahani (2007) it is the accumulation of multiple disadvantages that may throw young people in despair and, possibly, lured in by political violence. However, such accumulation evidently is very

stratified, and as such a linear or consisting normative relation between the different factors is difficult to single out.

While the notion of waithood has been crucial in popularising and making the difficult life condition of Arab Mediterranean youth visible, it has been criticised and re-negotiated by a number of scholars. More specifically, scholars critical of waithood have emphasised that the youth is an autonomous and creative agent of change, thus questioning the 'passive' representation of young people (Sika 2012; Honwana, 2014; Honwana and de Boeck 2005). In particular, scholars emphasising youth's agency have looked at the informal economic sector as a venue to possibly re-negotiate the youth's exclusion from the economic production and, consequently, the social world of adults (Singerman, 1995; Hoodfar, 1997). Other terrain of possible negotiations regards intimate relationships and the access to marriage. For instance, Diane Singermann (2007) presents evidences from Egypt that young people have found 'non-mainstream' ways to marry, as the *misyar* and *urfi* marriages. These are 'secret' marriages that include sexual intercourses but are not officially registered and therefore exclude celebrations, ceremonies and economic obligations. It means that, despite being socially minoritarian and heavily deprecated, alternatives to the 'traditional' marriage exist and are used by young people to access marriage and legitimate intimate relationships, when these are restricted by what Singerman calls 'the economic imperative', namely economic constraints. Echoing Singermann's findings, Jose Sanchez Garcia (2015) also argues that during the period of waithood, the Arab Mediterranean youth reclaim their youthfulness developing their own ways to face the precarious nature of their lives. Migration, informal business initiatives, and even belonging to a football fans club or to a specific music culture allow young people to become agents of social change in their societies.

It is crucial however to remember that such agency is bounded to the structural conditions in which young people live. In particular, not only material structural limitations are important here, as also moral factors guide young people's choices and agency. Manata Hashemi (2017), Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera (2010) propose that youth's agency is motivated by aspirations which, in turn, are bounded to a specific environment and context-specific notions, such as morality and dignity, with specific characteristics built on what is un/acceptable.

The three authors also reflect on how coping strategies are often individualised, mirroring a broader and general tendency towards individualisation. This is also evident in value surveys that have been recently conducted in the region, which highlight a shift in this direction (Camozzi et al., 2015). On such grounds, what Sari Hanafi calls ‘the new subjectivities’ have been able to flourish. In his work on subjectivity after the Arab uprisings, Hanafi (2012) argues that the revolutions in North Africa have produced ‘new subjectivities’ that have ‘reflexive individualism’ at their core. By this term, Hanafi means that new subjectivities reflect the fragmentation of previous social and economic systems, leaving room for a more individualised, autonomous subjectivity to emerge. This trend towards autonomy and individualism is the common background against which the youth from AMC have mobilised and made demands to both the ruling regimes and their own societies before and after the revolutionary wave of 2010-2013.

While the scholarship has devoted attention to understand the varied forms of youth agency, who come to terms with unfavourable structural conditions yet build political and social protagonism, the impact of such agency on gender norms and relations is less examined. When it comes to gender, in fact, some of the youth’s coping strategies against marginalisation may have contradictory and ambivalent effects by challenging, reproducing or even reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies.

In her foundational study of working class Egyptian women participating in the workforce, Arlene MacLeod (1991) analysed the women’s struggle to reconcile their economic necessity of working outside the house, with their traditional gender role dictating that they should stay home. MacLeod argues that working Egyptian women have severed Islamic female dress-code in order to be able to navigate the public sphere with autonomy and independence while, at the same time, conforming to social norms regarding women and womanhood. While the veil became the symbol of these women’s struggle to be able to work outside and become economically independent, it also was a tactical move to accommodate prevailing patriarchal social norms. MacLeod’s research speaks to the non-linear way in which agency and structure interact when it comes to gender norms and values. Contradictory findings are also reported by scholars researching the interaction between gender norms and agency in the broader context of waithood. Nadjie Al-Ali, Zahra Ali and Isabel Marler (Al-Ali et al., 2016) report how waithood, on the one side, disempowers young middle-class people because it delays the biographical transition to

adulthood; on the other side, it gives more time to young people to study and engage in activities that, otherwise, would be unavailable to them. However, the authors reflect, this ‘double effect’ is gendered, and has a different impact on young women and men. Al-Ali, Ali and Marler find that the opportunity of studying without the worry of supporting oneself may allow young women to attain higher education but makes them more dependent on the family of origin. While in some cases ‘the family may represent a haven from discrimination in the outside world [as in the case of young Palestinian women living under the Israeli occupation]’, in others it also ‘can strengthen patriarchal society’.

It follows that, when adopting a gendered perspective, young people’s strategies to cope or come to terms with marginalisation, which is a multi-level phenomenon and of which waithood is a specific articulation, disclose ambiguous and ambivalent consequences. While not translating into novel gender models or into radical models of femininity, the increased expectations of highly educated young women inform aspirations to independence and professional fulfilment. These are signs of cultural innovations, which may play out in a long-term perspective only.

### **3. Young people’s attitudes towards gender roles and relations**

This section discusses young people’s values and attitudes on gender roles and relations in the public and private sphere (education, labour market, political participation, and the family), outlined by SAHWA qualitative and quantitative data from fieldwork in the five mentioned countries<sup>ii</sup>. Findings highlight that young people sometimes reproduce stereotypical representations of the roles of men and women, while, at other times, they advance innovative models fostering gender equality. As we will discuss in the following sections, gender equality enjoys diverse degrees of support, depending on the topic and the kind of power relations that are challenged, or reproduced. For instance, we will see that young people widely support the idea of gender equality in education, while they tend to reproduce conservative models when it comes to the sexual division of labour and related gender roles within the family.

Moreover, youngsters’ attitudes on the matter vary according to different social backgrounds, at the intersection of class, education and gender. A clear gender gap emerges from our data, as young women tend to support equality between men and women in terms



of social positions and opportunities more strongly and widely than young men. Survey data in particular provide evidence of that. Moreover, girls tend to express stronger support for gender equality than boys, e.g. they often “agree strongly” with statements suggesting gender equality. Girls’ and boys’ views diverge in relation to the issues of women’s rights and equal opportunities in the labour market and in politics, the notion of male authority within the family, and gender equality in the family code. Girls’ and boys’ opinions however tend to confirm traditional masculine roles when it comes to the social and economic areas, such as the notion of the male breadwinner.

### **3.1 Gender and equal opportunities in education and the labour market**

Dramatic transformations in the field of education have taken place in the last decades in the region, and have had a deep impact on women and young people. Women have gained greater access to education, literacy, university enrolment, and to a variety of academic fields. Female literacy rates and other indicators of female education are on the rise, even if they remain lower than male ones, and with significant class and urban/rural cleavage.

The young people involved in the research belong to a generation experiencing what a fairer distribution of opportunities among girls and boys in the field of education looks like. It is no coincidence that this generation advances a clear claim for equality and gender equality in education, as evidences gathered during fieldwork demonstrate. For instance, survey results show that a significant portion of the surveyed young people agree on the fact that “*The same upbringing should be given to both boys and girls*”, while refusing the idea that “*Education is more important for boys than for girls*”<sup>iii</sup>. Between 47% and 87% of the young participants disagree or strongly disagree with the second statement, while the agreement with the first is even stronger, between 74% and 97%, depending on the country. This is a field where the attitudes of girls and boys are quite similar, although differences still exist and vary in relation to the country considered.

However, qualitative data show that these findings are not exempt from contradictions. Relevant inequality persists in the families’ investment in the education of girls and boys. Families also exert a strong control over girls, which may lead to their early drop out from school (CREAD, 2016: 3-10). Career guidance available to students at school

is often gendered-biased (LB\_FE\_1: 13)<sup>iv</sup> and girls and boys are steered towards educational fields that are understood as suitable for each gender.

On the other hand, qualitative data show young women's ability to contrast the gender discrimination they face within their family and the education system – or at least, their attempts to resist and counteract these exclusionary social forces. Young women understand the key role played by education in determining their social trajectories. They are aware of the absence of alternatives if they drop out from school and tend to do better than boys when it comes to their permanence rates in the educational system (CREAD, 2016: 3-10). Young women who have not succeeded in this effort and have left school at an early age, due to their low economic status and the lack of infrastructures, often regret the missed opportunity. This is a common element, for instance, in life stories and personal narratives of poorly educated young women in rural areas and disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods (MA\_FE\_1). It follows that indicators on women's performance in education and young people's values regarding gender relations in this field should be taken as indicators of socio-cultural changes that are currently underway, rather than consolidated outcomes.

Another key-result concerns the relevance of education to young people's social inclusion, and especially so for young women. The young people involved in qualitative interviews highlight the relevance and key role that education plays. Not only both young men and women consider education as a critical factor for their social inclusion and recognition; education also represents the main pathway for young women's personal and social empowerment. This becomes clear when we look at the gendered effects of school drop-out. Early drop-out of school has indeed different impacts on life trajectories of boys and girls. It often results in unemployment, precarious employment in the informal sector or social marginality for the first ones (TUN\_FE\_3; DZ\_FE\_1; MA\_FE\_1; MA\_FE\_3) and in the return to the domestic role for the latter (CREAD, 2016). As said, young women interviewed are deeply conscious of that. Education represents a way to challenge social expectations on their role as women, which revolves around marriage, and to reinforce their ambitions and professional interests.

However, the difficult transition from school to work of young people, and especially young women, in part undermines the beneficial effects of greater equality in education. Youth unemployment has reached very high rates in the region and it is indicated as one of the priority problems by the research participants. Skills mismatch, lack of generational

turnover, nepotism and the difficult access to jobs on a meritocratic and even basis, are among the factors that are more often mentioned by young participating in limiting their opportunities in the labour market.

Moreover, despite the growing inclusion of women in the labour market during the last decades, deep gender inequality persists in the access to employment and when it comes to working conditions. Horizontal segregation of men and women in the labour market, gender pay gap, and the risk of harassment for working women are widely spread phenomena, reflected by ethnographic and qualitative fieldworks in almost all investigated countries (TUN\_FE\_3; MA\_FE\_1: 9-13; MA\_FE\_3; LB\_FE\_1: 13).

Our interviewees consider that getting a job is of crucial importance for many reasons, ranging from providing financial stability, to matching a specific educational path, being socially included, fulfilling personal expectations, attaining emancipation (for young women above all) and getting married (for young men above all). Nonetheless, the reality is different and all interviewees report negative feelings associated to the present lack of economic opportunities: frustration and sadness, social marginalisation, resignation and pessimism, anger associated either with the desire to fight against the *status quo* or deviant behaviours, even suicide.

For instance, Hekmet – 21 years old, from Lebanon – is particularly disappointed about his condition as unemployed, having a degree in chemistry. He locates his own experience in a broader picture, in which unemployment is the norm for young people. He reports disappointment as nobody succeeds in getting a job according to his/her educational choice (LB\_LSV\_6). Therefore, young people are forced to choose between leaving the country, severing ties with the family and friends, and coming to terms with uncertainty in the everyday life, waiting for a better future.

Here again, exclusion from the labour market has also a different impact on boys and girls. For young men, unemployment or precarious employment in the informal sector threaten their ability to save money and reach the economic and social position required to get married. The delay in marriage seems to be the main contradiction faced by young men in the region, with far reaching consequences in their daily lives, social status and subjective experience, as vastly reflected in our empirics, as we will further discuss in section 3.3.

For young women, exclusion from paid work frustrates the social expectations articulated around (although not limited to) self-realisation as individuals in the labour

market. Indeed, the gap between expectations and actual opportunities seems to be one of the main contradictions faced by young women. This is especially striking for highly educated women (Barsoum, 2017), who deploy a variety of strategies to adapt to limited opportunities, from leaving the job market and opting for full-time unpaid domestic work for their family, to searching for education and job opportunities in sectors that are considered to be more suitable “for girls”. This resonates with the case of Mirna, a 31 years old young woman from Lebanon, who currently works as an administrative assistant in the private sector. She has been working in this field for many years even if she obtained a degree in Primary and Pre-school Education. As she points out, ‘*many people think that studying is convenient for women*’ and believe that along with engineering and medicine, education is a field perceived as ‘*good for women*’. Nevertheless, jobs in education are described as intensively tiring and not comfortable for women. As a result, strongly influenced by social expectations, Mirna studied education, but she decided to be an employee in an administrative office to have less responsibilities. Her account reveals the social pressure and the extent of gender discrimination that educated women have to face, as well as their bounded agency and choices related to professional career (LB\_LSV\_3).

Paid work seems to have a different and more ambivalent meaning for young girls employed in low skilled, precarious and informal jobs, especially in the agricultural sector (MA\_FE\_1). The ethnography conducted with young temporary workers in rural Morocco, for instance, shows that many female workers perceive farming/peasant work as hard and risky, both for their wellbeing and their social reputation as nubile, young women. For that reason, most of them plan to leave it when married, in order to improve their social status and be relieved from such tough work. At present and given the rural environment they live in, however, paid agricultural employment is seen by the female young respondents as partially rewarding, as a mean to reach financial autonomy and increase their status within the family, and as a meaningful social space they share with their female peers (MA\_FE\_1: 14-15).

These examples suggest that exclusion from labour market and the processes of social and economic marginalisation coming with it have a contradictory effect on gender models and norms. On the one side, they elevate young women’s expectations through education yet, on the other side, recast them into traditional gender roles and hinder their pathways towards the development of alternative gender models and female subjectivities

articulated around self-realisation in a variety of spheres, which may include but are not limited to marriage and maternity. For young men on the contrary, the lack of opportunities in the labour market make them unable to fulfil traditional male roles, casting them into a liminal and “waiting” position, as we will describe more in detail in section 3.3.

These trends describe the general framework in which young people’s values and attitudes towards men’s and women’s roles in the labour market take shape and should be inserted. Survey data show that although most of the respondents agree with general statements about women’s freedom and presence in the public sphere, the idea of full equality between men and women is still met with resistance, especially when women’s labour participation is seen in competitive terms, as detrimental to men’s duties and privileges. While most of the young respondents agree on the fact that “*A married woman should have the possibility to work outside the house if she wants to*” and “*Men and women should have the same job opportunities and receive the same salary*”, male respondents comparatively seem more reluctant to take up the idea than female respondents. The gender gap in the response to these two statements is 32 percentage points in Algeria, 17.7 in Egypt, 15.8 in Tunisia, 11.9 in Lebanon and 8.2 in Morocco. This is consistent with the fact that the majority of male respondents and a smaller yet significant percentage of the female respondents think that “*When there is not a lot of work, men should have more right to employment than women*”.

The survey results suggest that many young people in the region consider women’s participation in the labour market as an individualised choice that women should be free to make if they wish, rather than a right that women must enjoy on equal bases with men. This result needs to be linked with the persistence of the gendered division of labour and, in particular, the resilience of the male breadwinner cultural model among the youth in the region (see section 3.3). In this context, women’s opportunities in the labour market tend to be framed as subordinated to the cultural requirement defining men as the financial providers for the families, and tend to be accepted as long as they do not conflict with male dominant cultural and economic functions.

### **3.2 Young women and young men in politics**

The research participants who are active in social and/or political organisations, ranging from political parties to NGOs and informal political activism, articulate an understanding of social and political activism as a form of social recognition and as a strategic tool to attain public visibility and contrast youth marginalisation. Despite the contradictory results of the uprisings of 2010-11, then, young women and men from the five countries under examination believe that collective action is a way to improve the social and economic conditions they live in, eventually benefitting their countries and the national population as a whole. While this is a common perception of young men and women, however, as it emerges from qualitative data, significant gender differences persist in the external perception of the intersection between political activism and the gender of activists. Generally speaking, while men's activism is socially accepted, women's activism is perceived as less appropriate.

However, some common characteristics of women's and men's activism exist. For instance, in both cases the family background played an important role in determining the respondents' political engagement (TN\_FE\_1). In general, a high level of social and cultural capital inherited by the parents determines the respondents' initial civil and political interest. On the contrary, a low level of cultural and social capital played out as an element discouraging political involvement, although at a later stage. The respondents attending university report receiving political training in that context, confirming the importance of third level education in strengthening political engagement. Another important factor that influenced both women and men was the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring. The revolutionary wave had the effect of strengthening the political commitment of the research participants, as discussed by Wassim – 25 years old young man, student and civil society activist from Tunisia (TN\_FE\_1) – and Oussana – 25 years old young man, employee, active member of a political party from Tunisia (TN\_FE\_1). Wassim states that

*“As student, I didn't attend the university courses! The movement that started in December 2010 excited us; we were in contact with other regions and personally, I was in touch with some members of PDP (Progressive Democratic Party). We met in some places close to the University of Tunis or elsewhere. We discussed about what was happening.”*

highlighting how the unfolding of the revolutionary events reinforced his political persona and commitment. Oussama uses Internet as an instrument of political activism. During the revolution, he denounced political and social scandals via Facebook, invoking change. While at the beginning he preferred to use pseudonyms for security reasons, later he found the courage to exit anonymity.

*“The day of anger, the 14 of January I could not be in Hbib Bourguiba Avenue but I followed the facts on Facebook and Tv. When Ben Ali run away, you can’t image my joy!”*

Gender-determined differences are however present in this field too. A key result emerging from the fieldwork is that young people’s political and civil activism is often considered by elder generations as potentially dangerous in terms of weakening traditional hierarchies and social structures. Nevertheless, it is socially tolerated and justified in the case of young men, and it is perceived as an expression of masculinity. On the contrary, data from fieldwork suggest that this is not the case for young women. Young women’s political and civil engagement is still conceived as not appropriate, as it emerges from the following interviews.

Kaoutar – a 22 years old young woman from Morocco – is very resolute when it comes to pursuit her social and political projects. Her awareness of social problems is an evident aspect of her personality and her political and social activism represent her main interests in life despite her family disappointment. She is an activist who fights every-day for her aims. She is convinced that women have *“big potential to help a whole society”* and thinks that women’s determination will change the country although society is still reluctant to support women’s agency and activism because it is more focused on men’s needs and interests (MAR\_LSV\_5).

*“I think it’s about raising awareness. Sensitizing the women to defend their rights. Because I have the same rights as a man. I have the same right to succeed. That would be a step forward for the female cause. I will look as a feminist but I’m not. I’m for the equality, not for feminism.”*

Fadma is a 27 years old woman from Tunisia. She works in a commercial company where she also is a trade unionist. She never dealt with politics until the revolution of 2011. Since then, politics has gained a central place in her life to her family's astonishment. She deals with the workers' problems in her company. The following excerpt testifies her approach to politics and unionism (TUN\_LSV\_7).

*“There are no trade unionists in my family. Since the 17th December 2010, when Mohamed Bouazizi burns himself in Sidi Bouzid, I started surfing in the Internet and Facebook.- [After Ben Ali was expelled] I participated in demonstrations and sits. I stayed near Tunis Telecom, where our revolution had started as well. We were very oppressed and we faced many troubles in our workplace. It was a chance to defend and improve our situation. Our revolution was in the media. We call it the revolution for freedom. That was a real opportunity to defend the workers' demands. So I found myself working in syndicalism. (...) At that moment, I was really involved in syndicalism. I started to know more about syndicalism and politics, and started to recognize political faces -”*

Another key element emerging from the empirical data is that both young men and women involved in politics and civil society activism perceive their peers are disaffected to politics. To their eyes, young people should be more involved in civil society because their activism could benefit their countries in a determining way. Nevertheless, the huge level of unemployment, the need to find everyday solutions to survive and the widespread corruption in state politics push young people away from all forms of civil and political involvement aggravating their condition of social marginality.

A final element completes the picture regarding young men and women's political and civil involvement in Arab Mediterranean countries. It concerns a basic ambiguity and contradictions of some respondents when interrogated about their political interest. Although strongly disapproving contemporary adverse conditions of young people in the regions and actively involved finding alternative solutions and forms of resistance to these conditions in their everyday life, many respondents refuse explicitly to get involved in politics. Ayoub, 22 years old from Morocco, lives with his mother and works as a waiter in a restaurant. His hobby is acting in theatre and likes changes and innovations: *“Anything new I can get involved, is welcome. The theatre means a lot to me. The theatre made me feel important*



*and took me away from many things*". His life is rich and absorbing even though full of problems (he provides for his mother and he does not earn enough to marry) but during the interview he refuses to speak about politics ("*There is no space for politics in my head!*") when the interviewer explicitly asks about political involvement as a way to change things (MAR\_LSV\_4). Also Nordin, when he was illustrating the very bad conditions of young people in Algeria - due to unemployment, present and future uncertainty also concerning the opportunity to marry and maintain a family - he was asked about the role of the State around young people condition. Even if he implies that the State is guilty, he refuses "*to denigrate his State in front of foreigners*" (DZ\_LSV\_8).

In conclusion, according to qualitative data, young people are scarcely involved in political and civic issues; this aspect engenders surprise, anger and disappointment in those young people actively involved in politics. In general, young people's scant engagement and disaffection would testify their contemporary social marginalisation; moreover, it would confirm and reproduce traditional social representations about gender roles, as young women's political involvement is perceived as unappropriated by elder generations. Young women involved in politics are extremely conscious about the potentiality and innovation of their agency in terms of challenging traditional gender roles and, in general, traditional social norms and values that persist though weaker.

### **3.3 Gender roles, the family, and the issue of gender equality in the family code**

Despite being married or parenting is not questioned by the young people surveyed (AUC, 2016; CAWTAR, 2016; CREAD, 2016; HEM, 2016; LAU, 2016a), there are a number of tensions that emerge from the data when it comes to the definition of gender roles within the family. Survey data point out to the wide acceptance beyond gender divisions of the men's role as the economic provider for the family, but other issues – such as male power and authority within the family - are a terrain of contentious visions, suggesting that different cultural norms among young men and women are emerging.

On the one hand, most of the young respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement "*Men should be the main economic providers in the family*". This is the statement causing the less gender-based divisions among the respondents, as the male breadwinner model seems to be equally interiorised by both girls and boys. On the other hand, the

statement “*In a family, men should make the decisions*” seems to generate relevant divisions among male and female respondents. The share of young men supporting or strongly supporting the statement is 35.7 percentage points higher than the share of young women supporting it in Lebanon, 22.7 higher in Algeria, 20.6 in Tunisia, and 15.1 in Egypt.

Qualitative data enrich the analysis and suggest that the adherence to traditional norms of masculinity and, in particular, to the male breadwinner role, poses specific challenges to young men, as they often find it difficult to fulfil expectations because of unemployment or precarious employment. All male interviewees see their condition as extremely problematic when it comes to the possibility of getting married and, as men, maintaining their wife and children according to social expectations. This seems to amplify the sense of uncertainty perceived by both young men and women in relation to their future (LAU 2016a, p. 23).

The effects of young people’s unemployment on life transitions is central in Nordin’s account, for instance. He is worried because he is already 22 years old but his unemployment status strongly limits his opportunity to get married and therefore to be socially included. He is engaged but is not able to sustain marriage expenses and maintain his future wife. He would like to get married as soon as possible to overcome the impression of being socially marginalised.

*“[The marriage] It has a high cost. Then the housing problem. If you want to get married then her family asks for a high dowry, then the dinner, the bedroom. These things are expensive. We start with the house. If she doesn’t ask for anything, she will ask for a house alone. If she doesn’t ask for anything, she will ask for a small house far from the family, so there will be no problems. You have the costs, the dinner, the bedroom, her clothes, jewellery, her dowry. They are problems. (DZ\_LSV\_8)*

There is a striking contradiction between the sociocultural norms and expectations involving young men as economic providers of the family and the material living conditions of this generation. Young men keep on identifying themselves in an ideal model of masculinity difficult to fulfil at the practical level.

While the impossibility of getting married puts young men as Nordin in a marginalised condition of “waithood”, it also stimulates coping strategies and resistance

practices. In line with what suggested by other scholars (such as Singermann 2007), our findings reveal that young men develop the ability to “navigate” (DZ\_FE\_1) informal economy, collecting temporary jobs and combining skilled and unskilled employment opportunities (MA\_FE\_3). They consequently undergo de-skilling, taking up jobs below their qualification, when available. They may also cope with structural conditions by developing emigration projects, which can both be a coping or eluding strategy (LB\_FE\_1: 17-19).

The survey also explored young people’s attitudes to women’s rights and legal equality in the family. In particular, the right to inheritance for women and equality of rights in the decision to divorce are the two items that gather consensus among young people (although young women are more supportive of the latter in comparison to boys). When it comes to the portion of inheritance to be allocated to men and women, the principle of equal treatment meets little sympathy among young people presenting variations across the countries surveyed.

Here, a trend similar to the one described in relation to the issue of gender equality in the labour market (see section 3.2) can be observed. Young people throughout the region generally agree on women’s rights, such as the freedom to divorce and to receive inheritance. However, when the application of the stated principle conflicts with widely shared gender cultural norms or male privileges (e.g., the economic responsibility of the male family members; or the economic and legal dependence of women on men), less support is expressed by young people, including young women. This ambivalence is consistent with the emergence of signs of cultural innovation, which do not precipitate into actual and novel gender models, but suggest that the contradictions brought about by structural and social conditions may substantiate a transformation of values and gender norms in the longer period.

#### **4. Concluding Remarks**

Numerous studies have utilised gender as a prism through which multiple aspects of the social life and forms of knowledge can be examined (Sherman and Beck, 1979), and this chapter aligns with this approach. As we have seen, a gendered analysis allows understanding not only the new dynamics of power relations between young men and young

women in Arab Mediterranean countries, but also, on a more general level, how cultural orientations and values of young people in these countries are changing. At the same time, this approach has allowed us to focus on the cultural continuities and discontinuities between older and younger generations of women and men, and to highlight the compromises and mediations between past and present constructed to create forms of balance that both young women and young men consider satisfactory. Undoubtedly, the 2011 uprisings played an important role in giving shape to the changes expressed by the younger generations, and creating new levels of self-awareness among young women, especially in relation to their public roles.

As a matter of fact through the prism of gender we can observe how young people - young women and young men - confront fears and uncertainties related to the “waithood” experience. On the one hand, they share the clear contradiction between the (local) impossibility of transforming aspirations in reality and the construction of representations and imaginaries that significantly draw on symbols, information flows, cultural practices and networks of relationships that are territorially unbounded. On the other hand, girls and boys are divided by a different weight in the public sphere. In particular, well-educated young women pursue a vision of equal opportunities which is more and more widespread worldwide, centered around women’s access to the public sphere on an equal footing to men. However, at the moment, this remains an ideal, and girls have to cope with ‘different opportunities’ in their everyday (first of all as regards the job market). As a result, the way through which young men and young women also produce cultural innovation can be slightly different – with young women experiencing new representations of their identities while claiming equality in gender roles as it happens, for instance, in the world of education (or, for some of them, seeking recognition in political activism). Nevertheless, for both young women and young men cultural innovation can be considered a way of experiencing waithood together with agency.

As already underlined, if cultural innovation is a process that redefines dominant representations of reality, identities, and agency, this process is shaped by time – that is by the relations between past, present and future. It is fundamental to bear in mind that preserving or innovating, and choosing continuity over discontinuity, implies putting in relation these three temporal dimensions. As a matter of fact, in order to create a capacity for innovation, it is necessary to begin from pre-existent visions of the world that need to be re-

elaborated and revised to make sense in the present. A culture of innovation is first of all a culture within which the new can be appreciated; but it is also, secondly, a culture capable of learning from the past, from experience and memory as a source of meaning. And, of course, looking toward the future. On a practical level, the dynamics of cultural innovation carry the new cultures that are being experimented, with their values and rules, into the present daily life, in everyday actions and interactions. The result of these dynamics is a profound change of the ways in which both social and personal problems are defined, even before one is able to think of solutions to those same problems. The change of values, which are understood as principles through which we approve or disapprove of certain actions (Sciolla, 1998), constitutes a central aspect of this re-definition.

The future appears to be strongly woven with the present, and together with the past, if, for example, we take the desire for self-fulfillment of young women into consideration, regardless of their education. This is a new level of self-awareness, able to cross the public and private spheres and to gather the most useful aspects from each of these spheres to create a view of oneself under the aegis of self-determination. Of course, we cannot claim that this process only happens to young women. However, young women, as we have seen, are the ones who experience the gap between the principles of gender equality on their way to be formally established and the possibility to translate them into everyday life. At the moment, their aspirations to self-fulfilment, based on those principles, cannot find a practical expression both in social/gender relations and on a formal level.

To conclude, we would like to draw attention on one of the aspects of this social dynamic that is rich in contradictions, namely the professional sphere. The superiority of the social meaning of paid work for men when compared to the meaning of paid work in the case of women is a principle that consistently crosses – even if in different ways and forms – all Arab Mediterranean countries. Thus, while young men are forced to cope with lack of job opportunities, the precariousness of a thousand of odd jobs, and with the parallel responsibility of respecting their traditional role as breadwinners, young women experience a more specific – and more sophisticated – level of contradiction.

They share with their peers the widespread impossibility to have their knowledge and skills recognised by the market. However, as young women they must face a further problem. On the one hand, the high level of education they attain, should guarantee the possibility to adequately compete in the job market with their male peers. On the other hand,

this expectation contradicts a resilient and older patriarchal social order that is still present, but which is today more fragile and less legitimate. These young women are forced to cope with this order every day. Therefore, young women are suspended between cultural innovation and tradition, between the present and the past. Thus, while in processes of innovation of gender roles, agency, and its guiding values, takes on an experimental and explorative role that contrast the pure and simple preservation of what already exists, in the adhesion to tradition the opposite is true. Gender roles stay closed within the shell of a necessary separation between what pertains to men and what to women, and this separation cannot be brought back into question. According to tradition women should refer to the private sphere, and men to the public sphere. Today, as our research results show, in their everyday lives young women are not afraid to break these boundaries. At the same time, they know a mediation is still needed.

The mediation between the two universes of innovation and tradition is here represented by the young women's general belief that the male role as the breadwinner is still valid – although their new levels of education, their aspirations and, partly, also the daily reality suggest the opposite. Therefore, they live a specific ambivalence on the plain of cultural norms and values. They are immersed in the new present, clearly projected into the future, but constantly ‘pushed back’ in the past. This ambivalence, which their male peers do not experience, however, does not limit the strength of their innovative action. In our opinion, this takes shape, rather, as a strategic way of adapting to a world that is changing fast.

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<sup>i</sup> The SAHWA Youth Survey 2016, an international survey that includes 10.000 young men and women with different socio-cultural background, and the SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork 2016, a multisite qualitative fieldwork that includes 25 focus groups, 24 life stories, 8 life stories videos and 12 focused ethnographies.

<sup>ii</sup> SAHWA youth survey questionnaire includes a specific question in which respondents were asked to express their level of agreement (possible answers: agree strongly; agree; disagree; disagree strongly) on the following items: 1. “Education is more important for boys than for girls”; 2. “The same upbringing should be given to both boys and girls”; 3. “In a family, men should make the decisions” 4. “A married woman should have the possibility to work outside the house if she wants to” 5 “Men and women should have the same job opportunities and receive the same salary” 6 “Men should be the main financial providers in the family” 7 “ Women should have the possibility of going into politics” 8 “ Women are allowed to travel alone” 9 “Women should enjoy the right to inheritance” 10 “Women should receive the same inheritance than men”. Moreover, the analysis presented in this chapter draws on the extensive empirical material gathered in the qualitative fieldworks carried out in the five countries. For a general overview of the results (as well as the methods) of the research see [www.sahwa.eu](http://www.sahwa.eu)

<sup>iii</sup> Authors’ elaboration of SAHWA Youth Survey 2016 dataset.

<sup>iv</sup> References to qualitative data indicate the country (DZ= Algeria, MA=Morocco, TUN = Tunisia, EG = Egypt, LB = Lebanon), source (FG= focus groups, LS= life stories, LSV = life stories videos, FE = focused ethnographies) and numberb.