Adolescents' Representations of Working Women: A Field Study on a Sample of Secondary School Students

Youcef Lassoud [1], Moundir kharfane [2], Mega Faiza [3], Atika Gherghout [4], Ghedhaifi Hind [5]

[1] University of El Oued, Algeria, Email: lassouedyoucef39@gmail.com
[2] University of 20 august 1955 Skikda, Email: m.kharfane@univ-skikda.dz
[3] University of El Oued, Algeria, Email: mega-faiza@univ-eloued.dz
[4] University of El Oued, Algeria, Email: gharghout-atika@univ-eloued.dz
[5] Social Development and Community Service Laboratory, University of El Oued, Algeria, Ghedhaifi-hynd@univ-eloued.dz

Abstract:

This study aims to explore the nature of social representations that secondary school students hold toward working women in Algerian society. Based on the tripartite model of representations (cognitive, emotional, and behavioral), the study adopted a descriptive exploratory approach and applied a 15-item questionnaire to a stratified random sample of 120 students from a secondary school in El Oued province.
Findings revealed that students' representations were generally hesitant and leaned toward stereotypical conservatism. Attitudes varied between conditional acceptance and limited admiration, as well as implicit rejection shaped by a traditional cultural context. These findings were interpreted in light of previous research and the social representation theory, with several educational and cultural recommendations proposed to correct stereotypical images and promote positive attitudes toward women's work among adolescents.

Keywords: Social representations – Working women – Adolescents – Cognitive dimension – Emotional dimension – Behavioral dimension – Socialization

1. The Problematic

Arab societies in general, and Algerian society in particular, have witnessed rapid social and economic transformations that have contributed to reshaping traditional gender roles. Women have emerged as indispensable social and economic actors across various sectors, including entrepreneurship, administration, education, and even the security and military fields (Boujemaa & Cherrati, 2023, p. 53).

Despite this growing presence of working women, the social representations held by individuals— especially adolescents—remain varied and heavily influenced by deep-seated cultural, religious, and traditional frameworks embedded within the social structure (Ben Halima & Snina, 2022, p. 5).

Numerous studies indicate that social representations of working women range from conditional acceptance to covert rejection. Women's employment is often viewed as a potential threat to their familial role, particularly given the difficulty of balancing professional duties with family responsibilities. Ben Moussa's (2015) study revealed that women working in the health sector suffer from psychological stress caused by role conflict, reflecting social representations that are not yet fully accepting of women's professional engagement—especially when it comes at the expense of family obligations.

In this regard, Jodelet (1989), through her theoretical approach to social representations, argues that such representations are not formed in a vacuum; rather, they are constructed through ongoing processes of social interaction and cultural-symbolic socialization. They are continually reproduced through media discourse and daily practice, which makes them resistant to superficial change.

Similarly, the study by Boucheirit and Sidi Moussa (2024) showed that Algerian women entrepreneurs themselves experience a form of internal conflict—between their economic aspirations and professional ambitions on one hand, and societal pressures and traditional representations of women's roles on the other. This highlights the fragility of social acceptance of women's work outside traditional domains such as education and healthcare.

Furthermore, adolescents appear to be particularly sensitive and receptive to these social discourses, as they are in the process of shaping their own attitudes and representations of social roles. This makes studying their perceptions of working women especially important—particularly in light of research suggesting that male adolescents tend to hold more conservative views compared to the relatively open attitudes of their female peers (Mekni Siham, 2024, p. 67).

In light of the foregoing, the central research question can be formulated as follows:
What is the nature of the social representations that secondary school students hold regarding working women?

From this main question emerge several sub-questions:

1. What kinds of knowledge and beliefs do secondary school students hold about the competence and societal role of working women?
2. What emotional attitudes do students express toward working women in their family and community environments?
3. To what extent are male and female students willing to interact positively or negatively with working women in the future?

2. Significance of the Study

This study derives its significance from its intersection with three fundamental dimensions:

1. **The Social Dimension:**
   Adolescents represent a pivotal age group in the formation of attitudes and social representations. Understanding their perceptions of working women provides an entry point for correcting stereotypical images and fostering a culture based on equality.
2. **The Educational Dimension:**
   The findings of this study may contribute to the development of educational content that promotes respect for women's professional roles—both within and beyond school curricula.

3. **The Scientific Dimension:**
   Since social representations constitute a vital field within social psychology, this study offers an empirical contribution focusing on an age group that has rarely been examined in this context, particularly within the Algerian setting.

3. Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

1. Identify the nature of the social representations of working women among secondary school students.
2. Analyze the differences in these representations according to variables such as gender, geographical location, and academic specialization.
3. Determine the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of these representations.
4. Link these representations to the cultural and social determinants influencing the local environment.
5. Propose educational and social intervention mechanisms to correct negative representations and reinforce positive ones.

4. Rationale for Choosing the Topic

With the increasing presence of women across various professional sectors—such as healthcare, education, entrepreneurship, and security—it has become essential to explore how the new generation is reshaping its representations of this societal change. Although numerous studies have addressed women's participation in the workforce, research focusing on adolescents' perceptions of working women remains scarce in Algerian literature, particularly from an applied socio-psychological perspective.

Moreover, the topic is well-suited to the secondary school context with which the researchers are directly engaged, as it offers the opportunity for field application through the use of appropriate research tools.

5. Operational Definitions of the Study's Key Terms

5.1. Social Representations

Operational Definition:
In the context of this study, *social representations* refer to the mental set of images, opinions, and beliefs that secondary school students hold toward working women, as expressed through their responses to the study's questionnaire, which consists of three dimensions (cognitive, affective, and behavioral).

These representations reflect what has been constructed in the adolescent's mind through processes of socialization, cultural interaction, and personal experience. They are measured through the respondents' scores on the questionnaire items designed according to Jodelet's (1989) model.

The Three Dimensions of Social Representations:

- **Cognitive Dimension:** Includes the information and convictions that adolescents believe to be true regarding working women.
- **Affective Dimension:** Refers to the emotional attitudes and feelings toward working women (such as admiration, rejection, or anxiety).
- **Behavioral Dimension:** Manifests in the practical intentions to interact with working women (e.g., acceptance, encouragement, cooperation, or rejection).

5.2. Working Woman

Operational Definition:
This term refers to any woman who performs a paid job in the public or private sector or engages in a formal professional activity, whether within state institutions or outside them. Her presence may be direct or indirect in the participant's life (for example, as a mother, sister, or teacher).

5.3. Adolescents (Secondary School Students)

Operational Definition:
This term refers to the target group of the study—secondary school students aged between 16 and 18 years, enrolled in the first, second, or third year of secondary education. They were selected as the research population because they are in a developmental stage characterized by the formation of social representations and the establishment of personal attitudes.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

Introduction

The concept of *social representations* is one of the fundamental notions in social psychology. It is used to understand how individuals perceive social phenomena and how they develop attitudes and behaviors related to them. In light of the profound transformations taking place in Algerian society—particularly concerning gender roles and women's economic participation—it has become essential to examine the perceptions and attitudes adolescents hold toward working women. Adolescents represent a social group in the process of constructing identity and shaping attitudes, which makes their representations especially significant.

1. The Concept of Social Representations

The theory of social representations was introduced by the French psychologist Serge Moscovici (1961), who defined it as *"a system of values, ideas, and practices whose function is to establish an order that enables individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world, and to master it"*.

Later, Denise Jodelet (1989) further developed this concept, describing social representations as *"a form of common or popular knowledge that arises from social interaction and serves to interpret and adapt to everyday reality, characterized by being imbued with images, emotions, and social values."*

Social representations are therefore a system of non-scientific knowledge that reflects how individuals conceive of an object, a person, or a social phenomenon. They are the product of continuous cultural and social interaction.

2. Functions of Social Representations

The literature indicates that social representations fulfill several psychological and social functions (Abric, 2001):

- **Cognitive Function:** They help simplify, understand, and interpret reality.
- **Identity Function:** They contribute to the construction of an individual's identity within a group through the adoption of shared perceptions.
- **Guiding Function:** They influence individuals' behavior and guide their attitudes in everyday life.
- **Justifying Function:** They are used to defend positions or justify certain social practices.

3. Women and Work in Algeria

Since gaining independence, Algeria has undergone profound transformations in its social structure, which have affected women's positions within public life. Initially, women's employment was largely confined to the fields of education and healthcare; however, women have increasingly entered new domains such as entrepreneurship and the security and military sectors (Boujemaa & Cherrati, 2023, p. 53).

Nevertheless, societal representations of working women have not evolved at the same pace. Certain attitudes continue to reflect traditional perspectives that question women's ability to reconcile the demands of work and family life (Ben Moussa, 2015, p. 155). These representations often emerge in the discourse of young people—particularly adolescents—who are influenced by a combination of family upbringing, education, religion, and media exposure.

Moreover, the study conducted by Boucheirit and Sidi Moussa (2024, p. 214) on representations of Algerian women entrepreneurs revealed that women themselves experience internal conflict between their aspirations for professional empowerment and the prevailing societal pressures that confine them to preconceived ideals of "femininity" and "family perfection."

4. The Importance of Studying Representations Among Adolescents

Adolescence represents a critical stage in the formation of psychological and social attitudes. At this age, individuals are in the process of constructing their self-conceptions regarding gender roles, social status, and family interactions. Therefore, studying adolescents' representations of working women provides an opportunity to analyze emerging perceptions that are influenced by prevailing social environments and that, in turn, form the foundation for more established future attitudes.

The topic acquires particular sensitivity within the Algerian context, where the religious and traditional intersect with the modern and contemporary. This dynamic places the Algerian adolescent at the crossroads of tension between conservative social values and new representations disseminated through educational institutions and the media.

Field Study

1. Research Method

Given that the current objective of this study is to explore the nature of the social representations held by secondary school students toward working women, the descriptive–exploratory method was adopted. This approach is considered one of the most suitable scientific methods for studies that aim to collect information and data about a phenomenon in order to describe and interpret it as it exists in reality.

2. Study Population

The study population consists of all male and female students enrolled at Bouchoucha Secondary School in El Oued Province, totaling 680 students. The following table presents the distribution of the study population according to gender:

Table 1
Distribution of the Study Population by Gender

Indicator	Gender	Number	Percentage
	Male	246	36.18%
	Female	434	63.82%
Total		**680**	**100%**

As shown in Table 1, the study population comprises 680 students, of whom 246 are male (36.18%) and 434 are female (63.82%).

3. Research Instrument

The questionnaire used in this study was designed based on the theoretical framework of *social representations* as developed by Jodelet (1989). This framework assumes that representations are constructed through social interaction and manifest as forms of knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Accordingly, the research instrument was developed to include three main dimensions reflecting the tripartite structure of social representation:

1. **Cognitive Dimension:**
    This dimension includes a set of items measuring students' beliefs and knowledge regarding the competence of working women, their productive roles, and their entitlement to professional status.
2. **Affective Dimension:**
    This dimension contains items assessing emotional attitudes toward working women, such as feelings of admiration, rejection, or discomfort when considering women's participation in work outside the home.
3. **Behavioral Dimension:**
    This dimension aims to identify respondents' actual intentions for interacting with working women in the future (as a wife, colleague, supervisor, etc.) and to assess the extent of actual acceptance of this role.

The questionnaire consisted of 15 closed-ended items, evenly distributed across the three dimensions, using a five-point Likert scale ranging from *"Strongly Agree"* to *"Strongly Disagree."* This design allowed for the collection of quantitative data suitable for statistical analysis.

Initially, the questionnaire was reviewed by a panel of experts specializing in social psychology and educational sciences to ensure content validity. Revisions were made based on their recommendations. A pilot test was then conducted with a small exploratory sample ($n = 20$) to assess item clarity and instrument reliability. Using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, the results indicated that the questionnaire demonstrated an acceptable level of reliability.

4. The Main Study

4.1. Study Sample and Its Characteristics

The study sample was selected from the population described earlier using a stratified random sampling method. This approach was deemed most appropriate, as it ensures representation from all strata of the original population. The sample size consisted of 120 students, representing 18% of the total study population.

Subsequently, the percentage for each stratum (gender) was calculated. The following table illustrates the distribution of the study sample by gender:

Table 2
Distribution of the Study Sample by Gender

Indicator	Gender	Number	Percentage
	Male	43	36.18%
	Female	77	63.82%
Total		**120**	**100%**

As shown in Table 2, the study sample consisted of 120 students, of whom 43 were male (36.18%) and 77 were female (63.82%).

5. Statistical Methods Used in the Study

The following statistical techniques were employed in analyzing the collected data:

1. Arithmetic Mean and Standard Deviation — to describe and summarize the participants' responses.
2. Pearson Correlation Coefficient — to examine relationships between variables.
3. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient (α) — to assess the internal consistency and reliability of the questionnaire.

6. Presentation and Discussion of Results

6.1. Presentation and Discussion of the First Sub-question

In order to answer the first sub-question of this study—
"What is the nature of the social representations that secondary school students hold toward

working women?"—
the arithmetic mean and standard deviation of the participants' responses were calculated. The following table presents these results.

Table 11

Responses of the Study Sample on the Cognitive Dimension

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation	Evaluation Level	Rank
Women are capable of succeeding in various fields of work.	3.1	1.1	Moderate / Ambivalent Representation	1
There is no difference between men and women in terms of professional competence.	3.0	1.3	Moderate / Ambivalent Representation	3
A woman can be a successful leader or manager.	2.8	1.2	Moderate / Ambivalent Representation	4
Women's employment is essential for achieving economic development.	2.9	1.0	Moderate / Ambivalent Representation	2
A woman's job does not affect her productivity in society.	2.7	1.1	Moderate / Ambivalent Representation	5
Overall Mean for the Cognitive Dimension	**2.9**	**1.14**	**Moderate / Ambivalent Representation**	—

The results presented in Table 11 show that the arithmetic means for the items of the cognitive dimension ranged between 2.7 and 3.1, indicating that secondary school students' representations of working women are characterized by a hesitant and reserved stance.

The lowest mean was recorded for the statement *"A woman's job does not affect her productivity in society"* (M = 2.7), suggesting that some respondents harbor doubts about women's ability to perform professional roles without compromising their overall effectiveness. In contrast, the statement *"Women are capable of succeeding in various fields of work"* obtained the highest mean (M = 3.1), reflecting a limited yet cautious acknowledgment of women's competence, without reaching full conviction.

The overall mean of 2.9 for the cognitive dimension indicates that students' representations can be classified as moderate and somewhat stereotypical.

Overall, the findings suggest that secondary school students' representations of working women tend to be reserved and conservative, as evidenced by the mean values (ranging from 2.7 to 3.1), which did not reach a level reflecting strong support or firm belief in women's professional competence.

These results align with the findings of Ben Moussa (2015), who reported the presence of internal conflict among working women themselves between domestic and professional roles—reflecting societal representations that view women's employment as a potential threat to family stability. They also converge with the results of Boucheirit and Sidi Moussa (2024), who found that Algerian women entrepreneurs experience dual representations toward their work—oscillating between

ambition and social pressure. This same duality is evident in young people's discourse, especially in environments still dominated by traditional patriarchal representations.

Furthermore, the observations of Boujemaa and Cherrati (2023) regarding negative perceptions of women's work in the security sector reinforce the idea that adolescents at this stage tend to internalize familial and social attitudes rather than develop independent, rational positions.

These results can be explained by several interrelated factors. Chief among them is the conservative socialization process, which reinforces traditional images of women that emphasize reproductive and caregiving roles over productive and professional ones. The absence of strong, influential female role models in the immediate environment of adolescents also contributes to the persistence of such representations, particularly in areas where there is limited interaction with professionally successful women.

Additionally, the imbalanced media discourse—which simultaneously promotes women's success while highlighting their struggles—produces a confused mental image among this age group. The local cultural and religious context further legitimizes certain discriminatory representations, granting them endurance despite evolving social realities.

In conclusion, students' representations of working women appear to be conditional and constrained within a value system that still requires critical reflection and deconstruction. This opens the door to pedagogical and educational interventions targeting this demographic to foster more balanced and egalitarian perceptions.

6.2. Presentation and Discussion of the Second Sub-question

To answer the second sub-question of this study —
"What types of emotional attitudes do students express toward working women within their family and social environments?" —
the arithmetic mean and standard deviation of the participants' responses were calculated. The following table presents the results.

Table 12
Responses of the Study Sample on the Affective Dimension

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation	Evaluation Level	Rank
I feel proud when I see women who are successful in their professional lives.	3.2	1.1	Moderate / Ambivalent Representation	2
I feel uncomfortable with the idea of women working outside the home all the time.	2.6	1.3	Moderate / Ambivalent Representation	3
I prefer that my future wife does not work.	2.4	1.2	Negative Representation	5
I admire financially independent women.	3.3	1.0	Moderate / Ambivalent Representation	1
Working women lack family tenderness.	2.5	1.2	Moderate / Ambivalent Representation	4

Overall Mean for the Affective Dimension	2.8	1.16	Moderate / Ambivalent Representation	—

The results presented in Table 12 indicate a clear variation in the emotional attitudes of the participants toward working women. Respondents expressed relatively positive attitudes in statements such as *"I admire financially independent women"* (M = 3.3) and *"I feel proud when I see women who are successful in their professional lives"* (M = 3.2), reflecting partial feelings of respect and admiration for women's professional success.

Conversely, more conservative attitudes were found in statements such as *"I prefer that my future wife does not work"* (M = 2.4) and *"Working women lack family tenderness"* (M = 2.5), suggesting the persistence of deeply rooted stereotypes that associate women's employment with a loss of emotional warmth and family care.

With an overall mean of 2.8, the affective attitudes can be classified as hesitant and inconclusive, revealing an emotional duality among students — admiration for women's success on one hand and adherence to traditional values that idealize women's domestic roles on the other.

These findings are consistent with Mekni (2024), who found that admiration for women's financial independence does not always translate into genuine emotional acceptance of women's work, but rather remains conditional upon social and familial constraints. Similarly, Ben Moussa (2015) confirmed the persistence of reserved emotional attitudes, showing that negative feelings toward women's employment increase when it is perceived as a source of tension and conflict within the family.

These results may be explained by the emotional ambivalence of adolescents, who are influenced by two competing cultural systems:

- One that glorifies work, success, and independence, transmitted through education and media; and
- Another that reproduces traditional gender roles through family and community norms.

This tension generates inner emotional conflict regarding working women and weakens the development of explicitly positive affective representations.

6.3. Presentation and Discussion of the Third Sub-question

To answer the third sub-question —
"To what extent are male and female students willing to interact positively or negatively with working women in the future?" —
the arithmetic mean and standard deviation of the participants' responses were calculated. The results are presented below.

Table 13
Responses of the Study Sample on the Behavioral Dimension

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation	Evaluation Level	Rank
I accept that my sister works in a job that requires her to go out daily.	3.4	1.0	Moderate / Ambivalent Representation	1
I share household chores with my mother if she works.	3.1	1.2	Moderate / Ambivalent Representation	3
I do not mind being supervised by a woman at work in the future.	2.9	1.1	Moderate / Ambivalent Representation	4
I encourage my female classmates to excel academically and professionally.	3.3	1.0	Moderate / Ambivalent Representation	2
I do not like my wife to work in a mixed-gender environment.	2.5	1.3	Moderate / Ambivalent Representation	5
Overall Mean for the Behavioral Dimension	**3.04**	**1.12**	**Moderate / Ambivalent Representation**	—

As shown in Table 13, the behavioral attitudes of the participants reflect a relatively positive but conditional acceptance of women's professional roles. Statements such as *"I accept that my sister works in a job that requires her to go out daily"* (M = 3.4) and *"I encourage my female classmates to excel academically and professionally"* (M = 3.3) indicate supportive and encouraging attitudes toward women's work.

However, the lower mean for the statement *"I do not like my wife to work in a mixed-gender environment"* (M = 2.5) reveals persistent traditional perceptions related to jealousy, moral boundaries, and gendered norms — particularly among male respondents.

With an overall mean of 3.04, students' readiness to interact positively with working women can be described as moderate and conditional. Their behavioral attitudes appear not to be grounded in a full conviction of gender equality, but rather in selective acceptance influenced by the woman's relationship to them (e.g., sister, classmate, wife).

These findings align with Boujemaa and Cherrati (2023), who found that Algerian society continues to show limited acceptance of women's participation in "male-dominated" or mixed professional sectors, especially when such roles contradict cultural traditions or representations of feminine identity. Similarly, Boucheirit and Sidi Moussa (2024) observed that behavioral interactions with working women are often influenced by personal interest or familial proximity, rather than by consistent value-based principles.

These results suggest that although students demonstrate a relative openness toward women's professional roles, they still subject these roles to traditional social and cultural conditions, such as maintaining "femininity" or avoiding mixed environments. This indicates a gap between positive cognitive representations and real or expected behavioral engagement, underscoring the need for educational and awareness-raising interventions that promote balanced and realistic behavioral attitudes supporting gender equality.

General Conclusion and Recommendations

General Conclusion of the Study

The findings of this study revealed that secondary school students' social representations of working women are, overall, characterized by hesitant and conservative tendencies across the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Statistical analyses showed that while students do not express complete rejection of women's employment, they likewise do not demonstrate absolute support for it. Rather, their acceptance is conditional, shaped by a set of deeply rooted social and cultural norms.

Study Recommendations

In light of these findings, the study offers the following recommendations:

1. Integrate the topic of gender equality and women's work into school curricula, adopting pedagogical approaches that encourage critical thinking and deconstruction of gender stereotypes.
2. Organize awareness workshops and educational forums within schools targeting adolescents, addressing women's roles in society from scientific, humanistic, and rights-based perspectives.
3. Train teachers and school counselors on skills for addressing and correcting stereotypical representations among students, in ways that remain sensitive to cultural and social contexts.
4. Encourage the participation of successful local female role models (such as doctors, engineers, or entrepreneurs) in school activities to share their experiences and provide real-life examples that can positively influence students' perceptions.
5. Develop educational media content aimed at adolescents that presents balanced and realistic portrayals of women's professional experiences across various fields.

References

Abric, J.-C. (2001). *L'approche structurale des représentations sociales.* In J.-C. Abric (Ed.), *Représentations sociales: Collection Psychologie Sociale.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France (PUF).

Ben Halima, S., & Snina, A. (2022). *Tamaththulat al-mar'a al-'amila bayn al-qit'ayn al-'am wa al-khas [Representations of working women in the public and private sectors]. Al-Majalla al-Jazairiyya lil-Dirasat wa al-Buhuth al-Ijtima'iyya [Algerian Journal of Social Studies and Research]*, 12, 5–20.

Ben Moussa, S. (2015). *Sira' al-dawr wa al-dhaghṭ al-nafsi lada al-mar'a al-'amila: Dirasah maydaniyya bimustashfa Ibn Sina bi-da'irat Firanda, wilayat Tiaret [Role conflict and psychological stress among working women: A field study at Ibn Sina Hospital, Frenda District, Tiaret Province]. Majallat al-'Ulum al-Insaniyya [Journal of Human Sciences],* University of Frenda, 3, 155–169.

Boujemaa, H., & Cherrati, A. (2023). *Al-tamaththulat al-ijtima'iyya li-'amal al-mar'a fi al-qita'at al-amniyya fi al-Jazair: Dirasah li-'aynatin 'ala Facebook [Social representations of women's work in the security sectors in Algeria: A Facebook sample study]. Majallat Qadaya Ijtima'iyya [Journal of Social Issues],* 18, 50–64.

Boucheirit, Z., & Sidi Moussa, L. (2024). *Al-tamaththulat al-ijtima'iyya li-'amal al-mar'a al-muqawila fi al-Jazair [Social representations of work among Algerian women entrepreneurs].*

Majallat Afaaq Fikriyya lil-'Ulum al-Ijtima'iyya wa al-Insaniyya [Intellectual Horizons Journal of Social and Human Sciences], Special Issue, 210–225.

Jodelet, D. (1989). *Les représentations sociales.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France (PUF).

Mekni, S. (2024). *Al-tamaththulat al-ijtima'iyya li-l-zawaj min al-mar'a al-'amila: Dirasah maydaniyya bi-maqar baladiyyat Tiaret [Social representations of marriage to working women: A field study at the Tiaret municipality].* Unpublished master's thesis, University of Tiaret.

Moscovici, S. (1961). *La psychanalyse, son image et son public.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France (PUF).