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WOMEN, FAMILY, PRIVATE LIFE AND SEXUALITY

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Women's contribution to family, economy and social range in maritime societies. Portugal.

16th Century

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This paper presents some conclusions based on a case study, centred on a small Portuguese maritime town involved in overseas navigation and trade circuits during the 16th century. It further questions how the overseas expansion reflects on women's contributions to the family, the economy and to social behaviour.

As the expansionist phenomenon is traditionally interpreted from a male perspective, it is important that we examine the manner in which the female universe interacted with it. We intend to develop this approach at two levels:

1. Examine the implications of male absences in the adjustment and broadening of female roles in maritime societies, in the world of work, in economy and in society in general;
2. Detect the alterations introduced in family structures and in the forms of female sociability in spaces that are profoundly marked by women who remain in contexts traditionally dominated by men who depart as agents in the processes of overseas navigation, trade and emigration.

This paper is a summary approach that integrates contributions partially presented in other studies¹. It is also the result of a research project presented for doctoral assessment at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto. Its conclusions were drawn from an analysis of documental corpora that include notarised deeds, parish registers, town council minutes, tax registers, Inquisition proceedings, and wills, covering the period from 1500 to 1640.

Even though our functional model cannot be uncritically generalised to other maritime spaces we believe that general aspects can be highlighted, which structurally frame the vast social dynamics found within Portuguese maritime spaces during the 16th and 17th centuries.

Our thesis sustains that the particular conditions created by the Portuguese overseas expansion in the 15th and 16th centuries were bound to have a significant impact on the female

¹ POLÓNIA, Amélia – *Desempenhos femininos em sociedades marítimas. Portugal. Século XVI*. "Mare Liberum", Lisboa, CNCDP, Dez. 1999-Junho 2000, nº 18-19, p. 153-178 e *Mulheres que partem e mulheres que ficam. O protagonismo feminino na expansão ultramarina*. "O Estudo da História", Lisboa; A.P.H., nº 4, 2001, p. 79-98.

universe, expanding their roles and social participation. Underlying this phenomenon is the absence of men and its consequences on the economic, societal, family and demographic structures, most noticeable in maritime cities. In the same way that, in 20th century, during the first and second World Wars, female roles increased and women won autonomy and relevance, so women assumed crucial roles in the aftermath of the Portuguese expansion. These were roles that they had never undertaken before, whether we talk about work, economic or social range. At the heart of this phenomenon are the absences of men and its consequences, most noticeable in maritime cities.

The following diagram summarises our position.

[SLIDE 1]

Four types of correlations are shown: one is established with economic dynamics, namely in labour contexts; the other with social behaviour, the third with demography and the last one with family structures.

A. Interactions with the world of work [SLIDE 2. LABOUR CONTEXT]

The first correlation highlights the link between overseas expansion and the promotion of female participation in work. Overseas expansion required supporting industries for maritime activities, like sail-making, rope-making and ships' provisions industries, such as biscuit-making. In the absence of male labour, due to the temporary or definitive absence of men, involved in shipping and emigration, the demand for female workers became an economically relevant fact. Simultaneously, the internal development of coastal villages led to a demand for more servants, which was met by female migration from surrounding rural areas, as well as for crafts and trades-people, supplied by women who stayed in a world of men who had departed.

Female labour is not only prominent in maritime towns, however, but in the hinterland, too. This is borne out by the sail-making industry, which developed all over the north of Portugal, rural areas included, in an economic dynamic where weaving was no longer just a domestic or family activity. The same phenomenon also occurred with respect to the manufacture of rope, in Lisbon, a town where women figured as a workforce, and even in Ribatejo, as logistical support to the same shipbuilding industry².

² COSTA, Leonor Freire - *Naus e Galeões na Ribeira de Lisboa. A Construção Naval no Século XVI para a Rota do Cabo*, Cascais, Patrimonia, 1997, p. 342-359

We believe that, as long as the contextual conditions mentioned above were sustained, female participation in economic activities, including the labour market, and their social roles were a relevant historical fact in Portugal. We observe, in fact, a significantly higher number of female workers in the labour market of maritime societies. This is demonstrated by the number of women engaged in crafts, trade and professional occupations in Lisbon, in the 1550s. They ascended to 37% and 44% of the total, according to Cristóvão Rodrigues de Oliveira³ and João Brandão⁴, respectively.

To approach this subject properly, we cannot restrict our study to the world of work. We must also proceed with a broader socio-economic approach. We will therefore analyse the second aspect presented in the diagram, centred on the correlation between male absences and women's social roles in the maritime society under study. The case study is, in fact, helpful to enable us to understand the specific circumstances and variables under which the main issues in question, female protagonism and male absence, interact in those domains.

B. Male absences and female socio- economic behaviour.

Overseas expeditions, trade and emigration abroad were aspects that nourished this flow: a draining of male agents, whether transitory or permanent, short or long. This is borne out by the urban masculinity ratio, that in the town studied revealed a clear discrepancy in relation to the expected rates. The values obtained based on baptism records were close to those pointed out as normal in historical demographics, but, on the contrary, the results obtained from death records present profound variance, where the adult male rate presents values far below the expected. In consequence, we note an unavoidable increase of the female rates in this population universe.

Such a situation has incidence both in economic, social and family contexts. Tax registers express this reality in the number of female head of households, as we proved in the case study at two different time periods: one in 1568, the other in 1643. In the first case, 18% of the tax-paying heads of households were women, a percentage that rises to 43% in 1643.

This fact, directly related with male absences, led to profound consequences in the society in study, both negative and positive, in terms of the impacts felt by the female universe.

³ OLIVEIRA, Cristóvão Rodrigues - *Lisboa em 1551. Sumário...*, Introduction and Notes by José da Felicidade Alves, Lisbon, Livros Horizonte, 1987

⁴ BRANDÃO, João - *Tratado da Magestade, Grandeza e Abastança da Cidade de Lisboa na 2ª Metade do Século XVI: Estatística de Lisboa em 1552*, Lisbon, Liv. Féris, 1923

Among the negative consequences, we can point out phenomena of family structure breakdown, provoked by occurrences of concubinage and/or bigamy; by practices of second marriages and by the constitution of second families overseas; situations of family abandonment and lack of provision; or of deviant sexual and social behaviours, as is the case of female homosexuality, highly penalised by judicial institutions – both civil and ecclesiastic. In the case study presented, all these occurrences are documented in Inquisition proceedings.

Among the positive consequences, we can highlight how female roles expanded. The analyse undertaken for the Vila do Conde society, based mostly in notarial records, points to a clear increase in the roles undertaken by women who, in the absence of men, took charge of functions which would usually be considered out of their competence. These functions included, besides educating, endowing and marrying their children, taking charge of their own family transactions, which they managed with skill and aggression.

[SLIDE 3. SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT]

This engagement can be measured by the frequency with which women were involved in public actions via notarial registrations. In about 4000 records, between 1560 and 1620, around 1200 refer to women, not only as participants, but as central agents, which means they make up 30% of the total. The importance of this dynamism justifies a more detailed study.

Analysing this universe in terms of marital status, we find what was to be expected: the prevalence of widows among participants in notary acts: 63.5% of the women belong to this category, while 31% are married and only 5.5% single. Single parent families, resulting from the husband's death, naturally imply obligations and functions for women that increase their duties. The strong showing of widows in our sample is therefore understandable. The significant role of married women is, on the other hand, associated with the male absence in this maritime society, which is responsible for the transfer to their wives of responsibilities and duties that they would otherwise not perform.

Let us now look at those functions. In a long list of acts, we can see that collecting goods and money, legal acts and endowments are among the main actions imputed to these women. Other domains worth mentioning are directly linked to a range of civic actions, including endowments, adoptions, and the exercise of guardianship, a task which, together with endowment, was of great importance in family and social life. In total, all these practices amount to about 9%, in our sample.

Finally, we come to economics. Asset transactions, the collect of money and assets, largely due to death of men abroad, the participation in trade, the financial investment, the shipbuilding contracts, the management of ships, understandably through delegation, the involvement in credit transactions or financial investments, are some of the most relevant acts undertaken by women. All the economic activities added together represent the largest percentage of the sample: 74%.

If, at the same time, we look at the sociological profile of the women involved in notarised deeds in Vila do Conde, we find a clear prevalence of those who are related to seamen, mostly pilots. The presence of female relatives of merchants is equally conspicuous, even if the gap is significant. The scale of this representation is clear when we consider that 75% of the women are relatives of pilots, skippers and seamen.

The reinforcement and extension of female social engagement, which the above examples demonstrate, inevitably requires better preparation and qualification to intervene in the public domain with authority and independence. The signing of public deeds *motu proprio*, without the need to resort to an intermediary, is essential in this domain. In our data source, about 16% of the women involved are able to sign their names. We do not seek to prove that these are all literate women who could read and write, and who may have had regular schooling. However, we do say that it is undeniable that some of them are in that condition.

Some of these women undoubtedly knew how to write - and not only their name. As proof of this, we can cite the case of Francisca Carneira, wife of a professional pilot, who handwrote her own will, and that of Catarina Henriques, who entered her own accounts' books, and credit records⁵.

B. Interaction with the demographic system and the family space

[SLIDE 4. DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT]

Finally, we will now dedicate some attention to the demographic and family spheres. Male absences also unquestionably reflect on the demographic and family domain, especially in terms of the functions performed by family mothers.

We have already highlighted the link between overseas expansion, in terms of both shipping and emigration, and the high proportion of urban female population, due to the temporary or definitive absence of men. Low fertility rates, caused by large inter-generational

⁵ For further details on these issues, see POLÓNIA, Amélia - *Vila do Conde no Século XVI...*, Vol. I, pp. 797-818

gaps, marriages without children, a considerable number of unmarried women, and a high rate of early widowhood emerge as understandable demographic outcomes of these circumstances.

One of the main consequences of this scenario are single parent families, that confer on women the status of heads of households. As a result, there is an increase in the number of women who appear as responsible for the maintenance of family order, in particular in families of seamen, merchants and shipbuilders, groups that represent the most significant proportion of the active male population in the town under study. Furthermore, in these socio-professional segments, the absences were keenly felt by the women who remained behind. Considering the strategic endogamic tendencies, a woman, or several women in the same family, could often have husband, father, brothers, and even children, all away at the same time.

[SLIDE 5. FAMILY CONTEXT]

In terms of the direction of family possessions, the number of endowments identified among the registered documents is essential to understand the female participation in family affairs, since these interventions bestow them the right to arrange marriages and associate goods and families according to economic, political and social interests. This sphere of action would secure, *per se*, a truly significant intervention in family life, with obvious social repercussions.

The guardianship of children, grandchildren or collateral relatives invests these women with wideranging powers on the guidance of many lives and fortunes. This fact is all the more relevant when the legislation in force, especially that which is stipulated by the General Ordinances of the Kingdom, considers women to be judicially inapt to perform these functions.

At the same time, the economic situation analysed above also had a considerable impact in terms of demographic and family contexts. The growing demand for female labour and economic participation gave single women and widows a better chance to be self-sufficient, leading to lower rates of marriage and remarriage, as well as increasing the part played by married women in family income and social control. In fact, these women not only amplified their traditional roles in the organisation of domestic tasks, such as the education of children and care for the home stability. They extrapolate by far the attributions they are consigned by Christian normativeness, by also assuming functions that go beyond the domestic and private sphere to the social and public sphere, as proved in the notarial records analysed.

This central role in family life does not seem, however, to be assumed in confrontation with the male universe, but rather through active complementarity, that is exercised during male absences. We believe, though, that in the long term, this protagonism became a

structuring element of female performance in the domestic sphere, and even in the social sphere. Thus, it was not restricted to the longer or shorter periods of absence of the family head. In fact, some testimonies, that we cannot analyse here in more detail, point to certain attitudes of confrontation, even at a legal level, when the rights and functions these women took on as their own were disrespected.

The weight of women in the social universe of these maritime communities can also be symbolically determined by the fact that many of them often became favoured identification references. In societies marked by the transitory presence of men, these are frequently identified relative to a woman. They are often seen as son, husband, brother, or father of someone who is known in day-to-day life as a permanent reference⁶. It should be noted that a similar situation is identified by Caroline Brettell in an anthropological study of a Minho village of the 20th century, which lost many inhabitants to emigration, especially to Brazil.

Population mobility, documented in studies carried out by historical demographics, decisively contributed, in our case study, to this tendency. By attracting a vast young male population coming from the agricultural hinterland surrounding the seaports, these spaces concentrate a large number of uprooted individuals. Even when they marry, their family roots continue precarious⁷.

The uprootedness we mentioned, resulting from massive male migration, together with significant female migration, although lower in number, also tends to contribute to the dilution of an extended family model and reinforces a nuclear-type family organisation, where the ties between husband and wife are strengthened, so often underpinned by the absence of children, due to the increase in intergenerational intervals and early widowhood. Thus, we find, in parallel, cases of destructured families, as well as cases where bonds of trust become closer between husband and wife. These can be found recorded in proxies and wills. This trust is also extended to and visible in the world of business, where husbands transfer economic responsibilities to their wives, thus revealing a clear relationship of trust⁸.

[SLIDE 6. CONCLUSION]

⁶ Cf. BRETTELL, Caroline – *op. cit.*

⁷ Once more, we base our findings on the example of Vila do Conde, where, between 1560 and 1620, the percentage of weddings involving couples from the exterior varies between 38 and 61,4% of total weddings (cf. POLÓNIA, Amélia – *Vila do Conde. Um porto nortenho na expansão ultramarina quinhentista...*, vol. I, p. 254) .

⁸ All these scenarios are found described in the study developed in Idem- *ibidem*, vol. I, p. 808-811 e 814-816.

To sum up, by contributing to male absences and implementing factors of social instability, the process of overseas expansion, when analysed over time, reinforced the role of those who remained behind. They are given the responsibility of guaranteeing the normal functioning of community life. It is women who systematically assume many of these functions, through a sensitive increase in their social, economic and family protagonism. In spite of philosophical theorisations, of doctrinal and judicial conceptions and literary representations, and besides the rights and constraints they are consigned in coeval legislative corpora, women became central agents in community life. They assume, with great normality and according to the demands imposed by the absence of male agents, the roles and functions that unquestionably confer them centrality in the maritime communities studied.

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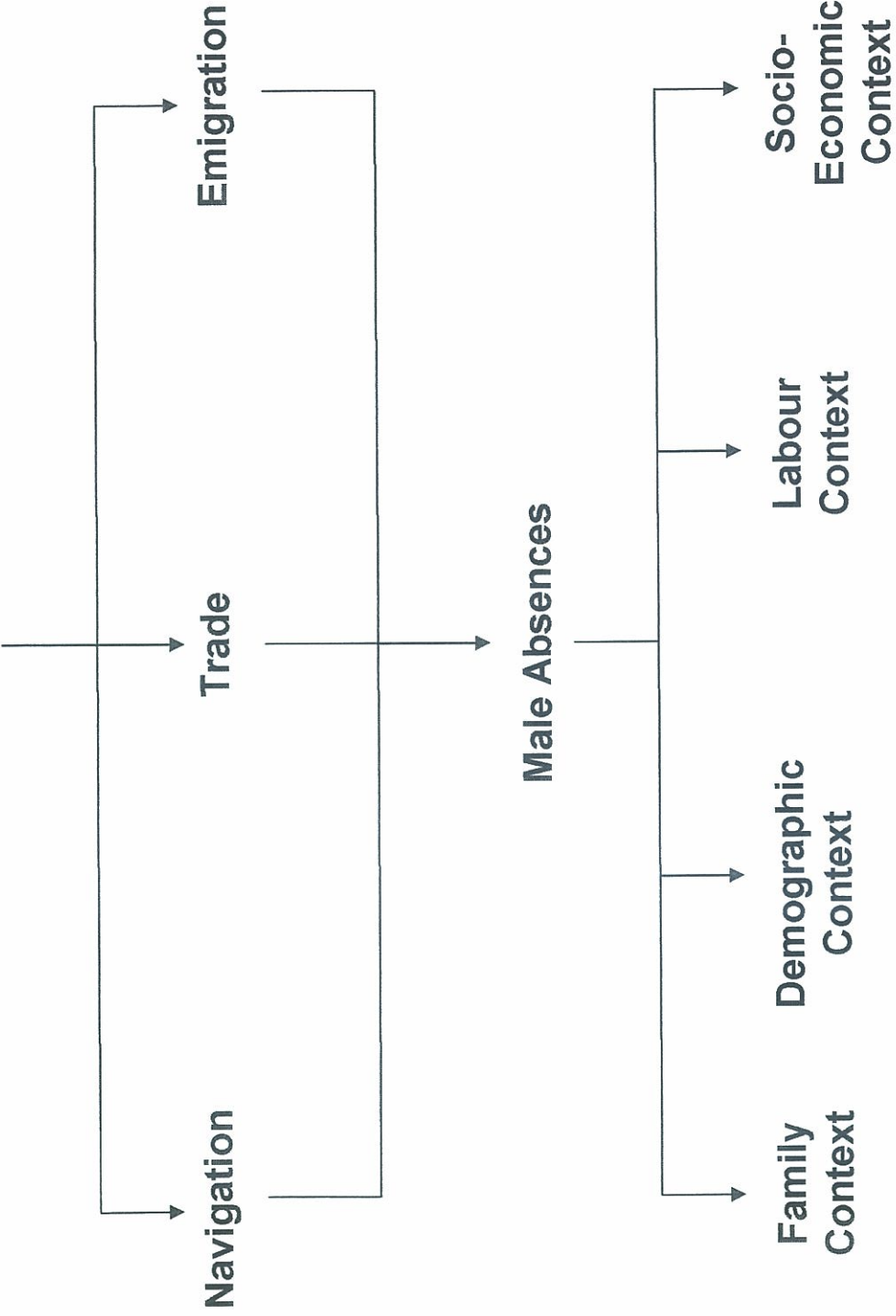
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Portuguese Overseas Expansion



LABOUR CONTEXT



Increased needs resulting from naval logistics



Demand for labour



Demand for female labour



Single women and widows:
greater opportunities for self-sufficiency

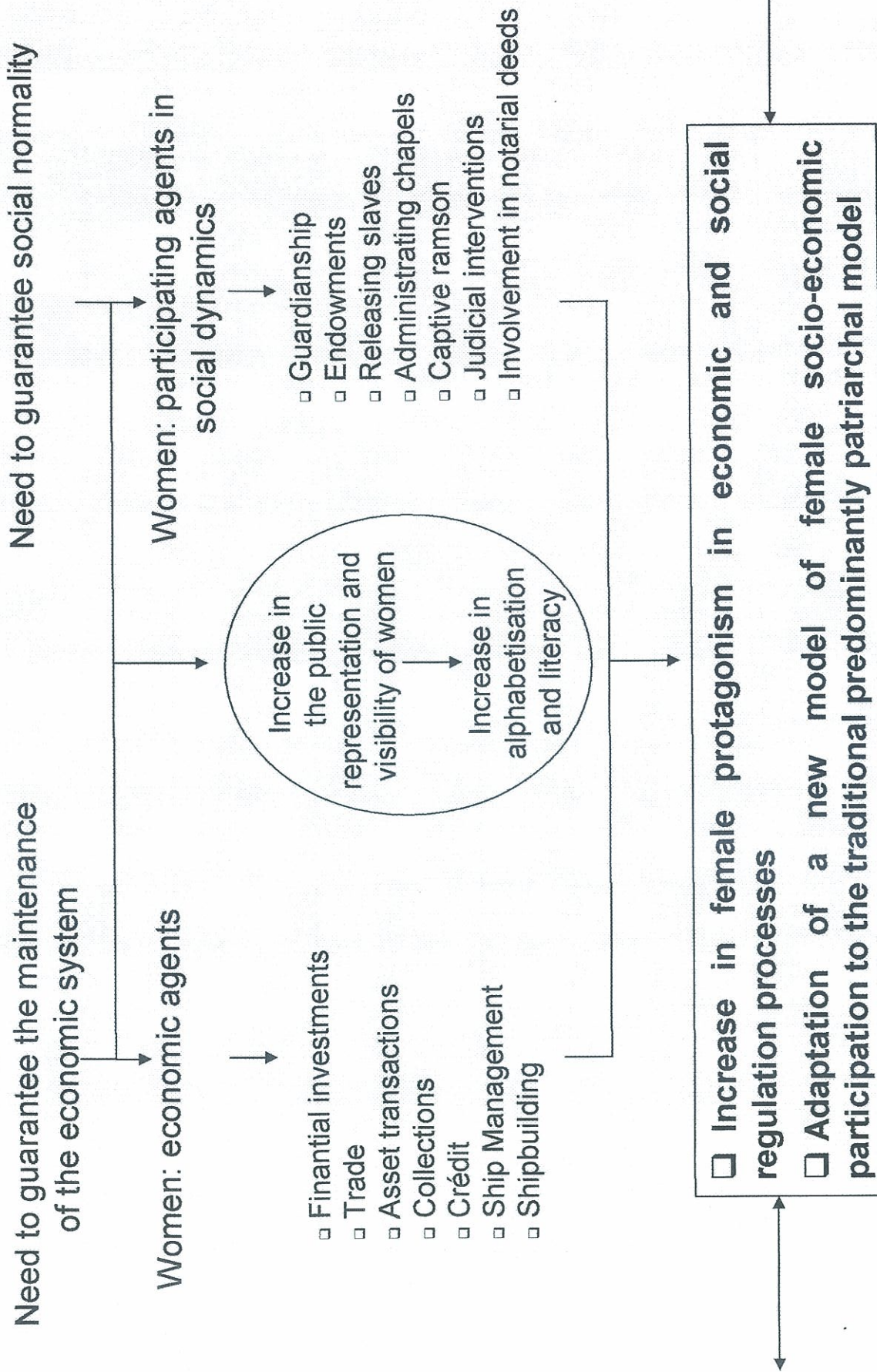
Married women: greater participation
in family income



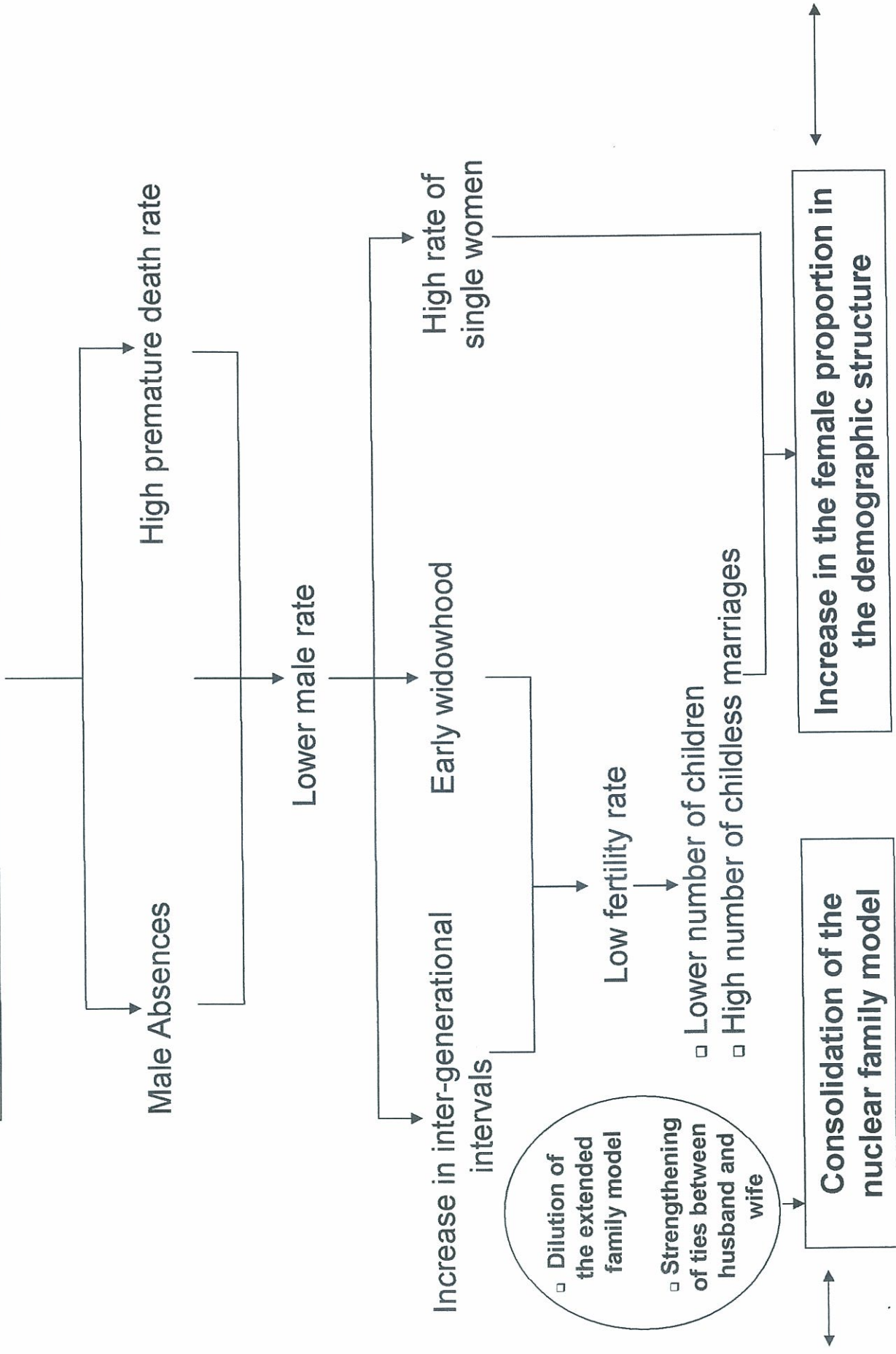
Increase in female participation in the world of work



SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT



DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT



FAMILY CONTEXT

Tending toward single parental

Women: heads of families

Substitution of male roles
by female roles

Education

Control of socio-cultural
representations
Furthering of female
education

Endowments

Orientation of social
strategies through
matrimonial strategies

Guardianships

Orientation of the lives
and fortunes of minors

- Reinforcement of female roles in conducting family life
- Extrapolation of traditional family roles
- Extrapolation from the private sphere to the public sphere
- Female centrality in family life within a patriarchal social structure



