

Woman Between Family and Workplace: Islamic and Feminist Perspectives

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Introduction

Contemporary age may be compared to a horse-race where every individual is racing and competing with every other individual to win the race. However, towards the end the reward which this individual achieves seems to him/her not much satisfying and sometimes even worthless and disastrous. In such a pitiful scenario, the conditions of women are far more pitiful than men. For them the race is not one- directional but rather, two-directional. On one direction they race to settle down their house chores and the child-care work; on another direction, they race outside to meet the challenges of the work-place. In other words, women face indoor and outdoor races. In the indoor race, generally men do not participate and leave the whole field of house work in the hands of women. So here the race is not between women and their counterparts, i.e. men, but between the efforts of women and the amount of house work. Whereas in the outdoor race both men and women are racing for more work and more material returns.

At such a juncture, few critical questions arise: Are not women facing many hardships and difficulties in participating in two races? Is it not possible that the whole problem of "work", both indoor and outdoor, should be perceived from a different perspective which should help women and men to think that they

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complement each other and should therefore cooperate with each other?

In this paper, a humble attempt is made to address such crucial questions. For this purpose, feminist and Islamic perspectives on familial institutions and public participation of women are participated and analyzed. It is argued that the extreme trends in feminism emphasize the public participation of women over the familial work and also demand absolute freedom for all forms of sexuality and reproduction to this effect. Whereas, Islam gives central focus on familial institutions and also allows women to participate in the outside workplace while following certain etiquettes. But Muslim women seem to be facing many problems and challenges in managing their familial work while giving their services outside in the workplace due to cultural and interpretational problems which should be overcome.

Feminist Perspective

Feminist philosophy originated during the eighteenth century, which is described as the period of Enlightenment. It has gradually developed various schools of thought within its wide horizon liberal, socialist, Marxist, radical, existentialist, gender, post modern, etc.¹ In its earlier phase, feminists mostly emphasized about the equal rights of women with men for education, property, voting and other rights of public participation which were denied to them. For instance, Catherine Macaulay (1731-91) in her work, *Letters to Education*, totally condemned the then existing education system which was based on discrimination between boys and girls and which never encouraged women to continue their higher education.² Besides her, Mary Wollstone Craft (1759-97) in her work, *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, completely refuted 'sexual dimorphism' of one of the renowned political philosophers, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) who presented two different programs of education for boys and girls.³ There were few others including John Stuart Mill (1806-73) who wrote against the legal discrimination against women.⁴

However, in the later phase, some of the feminists started emphasizing the public role of women at the cost of familial role. For instance, Betty Friedman, a

modern liberal feminist who is regarded as the mother of the feminist movement in America, in her highly influential work, *Feminine Mystique*, (1963) contended that preoccupation of women in wifing and mothering all the time at home is nothing but a 'feminine mystique'.⁵ Hence, she argued that women should quickly handle the house chores and should take up some public role. The arguments of Betty Friedman appealed to thousands of women and they practically followed her ideas. But, to their disappointment they found that the work at home remain waiting for them when they come back home. Hence, they complained against double-work load, work in the family and work outside. Betty Friedman came up with some solution to this problem in her work, *The Second Stage*. Here, she suggested partial assimilation of women in the workplace, and partial counter-assimilation of men in the family work.⁶ Thus, both men and women would work with cooperation both in the family and outside workplace. Yet, the problem of women of double work load continue because of lack of cooperation of men in house chores.

Here, it seems necessary to clarify that the problem in the feminist philosophy does not lie in its demand for the cooperation of men with women in the house chores, but it lies in the devaluation of the familial institutions and overemphasis on the outside work. However, as mentioned earlier, feminism is not one unified and integrated philosophy, rather quite diversified in various trends. Hence, there are feminists who even emphasize gender-war and gender-deconstruction to fight against the gender differences and gender roles to assimilate women in the work force, overlooking the familial institutions. Whereas there are other feminists like Christina Hoff Sommers who totally reject the gender-war feminists.⁷ But, the fact remains that the radical and the extreme feminists of various schools have made their international network and are involved in various organizations including the United Nations.⁸ Along with their organizational work, they also have their intellectual agenda of writing and publication through which they are influencing hundreds of women across the world. A passing survey of some of their arguments on the liberation of women would reveal their devaluation of the familial institutions, overemphasis for the assimilation of women in the workforce and demands for

absolute freedom for all forms of sexuality and reproduction.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), a socialist feminist, in her work *The Man-Made World*, contends that marriage is a dishonest 'bargain of life' in which women are forced to get married for economic reasons.⁹ Juliet Mitchell, another socialist feminist in her works, *The Longest Revolution* (1966)¹⁰, *Women's Estate* (1971)¹¹, and *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974)¹² argues that family is a biological and ideological unit. For this reason, even the Marxist revolution cannot eliminate the institution of family unless it is also followed by Freudian Psychoanalyst revolution which should bring a change in human psyches. According to a radical feminist Kate Millet, sex is political.¹³ She argued that marriage is a financial alliance and family, a unit of patriarchal order. Hence, she suggested the need for sexual revolution and contraceptive devices for the sexual freedom of women. Mary Daly, in her work, *Pure Lust*, asserts that women should come out from 'plastic' and 'potted passions' of becoming a 'fulfilled woman'.¹⁴ All such passions of woman are illusions which domesticate women in a so-called comfortable home but with no joy. Women should therefore liberate herself from such 'morality of victimization' and become rough, wild, and lusty. Shulamith Firestone, in *Dialectic of Sex*, contends men and women are two different classes and the heart of women's oppression are child-bearing and child-rearing.¹⁵ Hence, there is a need for a biological revolution. For her, pregnancy is 'barbaric' and childbirth is like 'shitting a pumpkin'. Hence, for the elimination of the distinct reproductive role of women and the demise of family, new reproductive technology is inevitable. According to psychoanalytic feminists like Karen Homey¹⁶, Clara Thompson¹⁷, and others, women and men identities are not related to biologies but patriarchal culture. Hence, there is a need for psychological and cultural transformation and a complete transformation of the social institutions.

Simon de Beauvoir (1908-86), an existentialist feminist, in her work *The Second Sex* (1972), argued that woman is always perceived as 'the other', inessential and incidental.¹⁸ She contends that marriage drains the woman's soul of its capacity and a prostitute is at least better than a wife. A prostitute gets wealth

and fame, but a wife only gets enslavement. Pregnancy alienates a woman from herself and the role of a mother is a stumbling block in her development. Hence, a woman should liberate herself from wifehood and motherhood and should assume the role of a career. According to Helen Cixous, a postmodern feminist, masculine writing is connected with man's sexuality -phallogentric, whereas feminine writing is connected with woman's sexuality.¹⁹ Hence women should fight against the dominant language and thought and should write in her own language and style. Similarly, Luce Irigaray contends that patriarchy is based on phallic libidinal economy of men.²⁰ Hence, women should explore their body and express their thoughts to undo the effects of phallogentric discourse. Heidi Hartman, a gender feminist, in *Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, argues that it is not necessary to organize reproduction through the heterosexual relationship only.²¹ People should be allowed to be sexually polymorphous and all forms of sexual relationships should be accepted. In other words, marriage based on heterosexual union between man and woman following their respective religious laws and conditions need not be continued as the only legal and legitimate sexual relation. Hence all deviant forms of sexuality like homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality should be promoted. All other gender feminists including Judith Butler, considers heterosexuality and motherhood to be political institutions.²² According to them, 'gender' and gender-related roles are not connected with biology and sexual differences but they are socially constructed.

From the above discussion, it is quite obvious that the extreme feminists perceive familial institutions as women's enslavement, units of oppression and suppression, mere financial alliances, stumbling block in the development of women, strong political institutions created by society. Hence they suggest biological revolution, psychological revolution, Marxist revolution, sexual revolution and reproductive-control technological devices for the liberation of women.²³ All this implies the elimination of the original concepts of marriage and family based on respective religious laws and traditions replacing them with alternative life styles. Alternative life styles should be based on the absolute freedom of sexuality and the

freedom from marital and familial responsibilities and institutions.

The implications of this absolute freedom of sexuality and freedom from familial institutions are so destructive and pernicious that the whole human civilization is threatened. Obviously, if these feminists demand the elimination of the institutions of family which is the basic unit of a civilization, then nothing would be left except illicit sexuality, broken families, either illegitimate or morally corrupt, left-out children. Neither women nor men and children can benefit from such a degenerated society.²⁴ Hence there is a need of a balanced and moderate approach to life through which justice can be done to both family and outside work. This requires cooperation between men and women both in the house chores and outside work not a race against each other for domination.

Islamic Perspective

Familial institutions occupy a prominent position in Islam because the family is considered as the fundamental unit of Islamic civilization. Marriage between a man and a woman with their mutual consent and certain obligations toward each other based on the Shar‘iah, is the only basis of a family. Neither sexual relations outside marriage nor the formation of family outside marriage is possible in Islam. Furthermore, marriage is considered not only a physical union but a spiritual union of man and woman through which they attain tranquillity and appreciate the signs of Allah., s.w.t. The Qur’an says:

And among His Signs is this, that He created yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them. (al-Qur’an 30:21)

Thus, in Islam, unlike the extreme trends in feminism, marriage is not considered as an enslavement of woman as a mere economic alliance and a mere source of sexual satisfaction. Islam looks at marriage as a sign of Allah s.w.t. through which men and women attain peace and tranquillity.

Furthermore, in Islam, unlike the deviant feminist philosophy, sexuality is not liberated from morality and spirituality. In fact, Islam has clearly presented the

rules and norms for the sexual satisfaction of husband and wife and it is reckoned as *ibādah* (worship). But all other forms of sexual satisfaction like pre-marital or extra-marital sexual satisfaction, temporary marriages, cohabitation, and other deviant forms of sexuality like lesbianism, homosexuality, bisexuality, etc. are all absolutely forbidden. Following Qur'anic verses and the Prophetic traditions can throw sufficient light on the above matter:

Abu Zar narrated that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: "Did Allah not make for you that from which you can give *sadaqa*? Verily for every time you say *Subhana Allah*, there is *sadaqa*. And for every time you say *Allahu Akbar* there is *sadaqa*. And for every time you say *Alhamdu lillah*, there is *sadaqa* and in every act of enjoying what is right there is *sadaqa* and in every act of forbidding evil, there is *sadaqa* and in your sexual relations there is *sadaqa*." There upon the companion asked: "When we go to our wife, there is a reward for it?", the Prophet (ﷺ) said: "What do you think about that person who fulfils his desire outside of marriage? He deserves penalty. Therefore when he fulfils his desire in a rightful manner he deserves reward".²⁵

Nor come nigh to adultery for it is a shameful (deed) and an evil, opening the road (to other evils). (al-Qur'an 17: 32)

(We also sent) Lut (as a messenger); behold, He said to his people, Do you do what is indecent though you see (its inequity)? Would you really approach men in your lusts rather than women? Nay, you are a people (grossly) ignorant. (al-Qur'an 27: 55)

As for motherhood, Islam assigns a prominent position to mother. A mother is an embodiment of compassion, mercy and sacrifice. Unlike anti-family feminists, childbearing and childbirth is not considered as disgusting and damaging to woman, rather, a blessing of Allah s.w.t.. to human race. In fact, the Qur'an has fully

acknowledged this responsibility of women as mothers.

And We have commanded unto mankind towards parents. His mother beareth him with suffering bringing forth with suffering and weaning him in thirty months. (al-Qur'an 31:14)

From the above, it is quite clear that Islam gives due recognition and respect to familial institutions. It is family which not only disciplines sexual relationship between man and woman as husband and wife, but it also offers psychological, sociological, moral and spiritual satisfaction to them as co-partners in life. Besides this, family is also the first educational and moral institution for children where they learn the values of love and respect towards each other and their rights and obligations towards the family members and society as a whole. For this reason, family is looked upon as a cradle of civilization.²⁶

As far as the Islamic stance on the public participation of woman is concerned, it is very concrete and clear. Legally, in Islam, the financial responsibility of a family is assigned to man, since men are physically stronger than women, and they can also protect the chastity of women. The Qur'an says:

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. (al-Qur'an 4: 34)

Although in Islam men are given the financial responsibility, women are not prevented from participating in shouldering the financial responsibility of family with men. While following the Islamic etiquette of dress and social interaction and performing the familial role, women are allowed to participate in the public sphere. Not only this, Islam also offers women legal rights for their own earnings and for their own property. She has all the rights to spend her own earnings and property which she has inherited from her parents. The Qur'an says:

To men is allotted what they earn and to women what they earn. (al-Qur'an 4: 32)

However, there are few Muslim scholars who hold the opinion that woman should be confined only -within the family and should not involve herself in the public domain. These scholars generally give their own interpretations of few Qur'anic verses and they also cite few weak or inauthentic Prophetic traditions to support their arguments. For instance, the following Qur'anic verse is cited:

And stay quietly in your homes, and make not a dazzling display, like that of the former times of ignorance. (al-Qur'an 33: 33)

Nevertheless, few other scholars who support the public participation of women hold the opinion that this particular Qur'anic verse is referred to the blessed wives of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. They also argue that even if it is generalized to include all women, the verse forbids women from public role if they like to display their beauty in the workplace. For this reason, the Qur'an has enjoined both men and women to lower their gaze and cover properly to avoid moral and sexual lapses and protect their chastity.

Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty, And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty.
(al-Quran 24: 30-31)

According to few other scholars, women should not be allowed any public role because men are not allowed to follow the opinions of women, even if they are consulted. They cite the following Prophetic tradition in this connection: Take consultation from women but oppose them and do not follow them. Do opposition against women because there is blessing in the opposition against them:²⁷

However, according to other Muslim scholars, the above traditions are weak and unauthentic. They cite the historical evidence of the famous treaty of Hudaibiyah when the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ had consulted his wife Umm Salaama and even followed her advice and her advice proved practical and helpful.²⁸

Besides this, several instances during the periods of the Prophet Muhammad

ﷺ and the Khulafa-e-Rashidun (Rightly Guided Caliphate) can be presented to demonstrate the fact that even the blessed wives of the Prophet ﷺ and other blessed women companions participated in public realm. For instance, Umm al-Mu'minin 'Aieshah (may Allah be pleased with her) attained the position of muftiyah and provided many religious rulings (*fatāwa*) the Caliphs like Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthman (may Allah be pleased with them).²⁹ Shifa binti Abdullah was appointed as an inspector judge (*muhtassibah*) in the market of Madina. She was even encouraged by the Caliph 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) to counsel him because she was recognized as a woman of high learning and understanding.³⁰ Umm 'Ammarah participated in the battles of Uhad, Hunayn, and Yamamah and was seriously wounded.³¹ Many such examples can be cited to show the participation of women during this period in social, economic, and political spheres.³² However, these women neither undermined the familial responsibilities as insignificant and trivial nor overlooked them. They also followed Islamic norms or dress and social interaction.

Dynamics Behind Work: Work as *Ibādah*

It is important to remember that those blessed women of Islam (as discussed above), who worked indoors and outdoors perceived house chores in the family and the other works at the workplace as service (*ibādah*) to Allah (s.w.t.). Their perceptions of life and work were very clear, comprehensive and concrete. They looked at life as an integrated whole and their purpose of life as performance of vicegerency. For this reason, both their indoor and outdoor work were not a material race for its own sake but *ibādah*, to seek the pleasure of Allah (s.w.t.). It is, therefore, essential to comprehend that in Islam, even economic activity is *ibādah* provided it is performed while following the Islamic injunction on economic endeavours.

Cooperation at Work

The other important point to be duly considered here is the cognition,

communication, and cooperation of men. Several historical facts can be pointed out to demonstrate that even the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), the Khulafa-e-Rashidun and other Companions have not only recognized the familial services of women with due respect but had established good traditions of keeping communication with their wives and also cooperating with them in the house chores. Few instances can be cited here. It is reported in one of the Prophetic traditions that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ used to be involved in the family work at home and when he would hear the voice of *adhān* (call to prayer), he would go out from the house.³³

Once, Caliph ‘Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) is reported to have said the following:

Is it not true that she cooks my food, washes my clothes, and suckles my children, thus relieving me of the necessity of employing a cook, a washer man, and a nurse, although she is not in the slightest degree responsible for any of these duties? Not only that .I enjoy peace of mind on account of her and I am protected from committing the sin of adultery. In view of all these advantages I put up with her excesses. You should also do the same.³⁴

From this and several other incidents of the lives of the Companions, it is quite evident that the familial works of women were fully recognized by them even with this understanding that women are not obliged to do many of such works. Not only this, they also offered cooperation to the women in the indoor familial works. Besides this, they also tolerated some of the excesses of women in view of their other positive contribution and positive qualities.

Interpretational and Cultural Problems

Although Islam has allowed women to contribute positively to the society as discussed above, it is however, observed that women are either discouraged to work outside or if they are allowed, they are not helped by men in the house work.

Besides the lack of cooperation there is also a big communication gap between the husband and wife and between parents and children. In some cases, it is observed that the attitude and the speaking tone of the husbands with wives and children is so authoritarian and despotic that the home seems like a mini-monarchy. All these factors are not helpful for women to lead a peaceful and healthy life in the home and to contribute positively in the society through her abilities and talents.

In the past, even during the period of the Rightly Guided Caliphate, it is reported that the male attitude towards the family members in some cases was not gentlemanly and polite, rather autocratic. But the Caliphs could check them and show them the right attitude on such matters taking the examples of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. One such incident can be cited here to illustrate the point:

It is reported about the second Caliph (may Allah be pleased with him) that once 'Amir, a companion who held a high position in the government, visited him and was surprised to see how few children had mounted the chest of the Caliph and were playing. The Caliph realized the feelings of the person and asked him as to how he treats his children. Amir said: "Amir al-Mo'mineen, as soon as I enter my house, the people of my household are struck with terror and stand dumb with fear", On hearing this the Caliph said: "Amir, you are a follower of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and yet you are ignorant of the important injunction that a Muslim should behave towards his family members with extreme love and deep tenderness."³⁵

Contrary to the above, as time passed, as in other aspects and dimensions in the Muslim societies, even in this private domain of family life, the Qur'anic injunctions, Prophetic traditions and practices of the Companions were gradually put aside. Instead of this, the general Muslim practices whether based on Islam or local cultures are considered to be either Islamically or socially approved. Hence, there is lesser or no recognition of the familial services of women, lesser or no communication between husband and wife and children, and lesser or no cooperation between men and women in the household chores and such practices

are generally perceived as either Islamic or socially preferable norms.

A critical analysis of such norms and practices reveal that they are only based on local cultures and narrow, confused and vague interpretations of the Islamic texts the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions by few Muslim scholars. Because of such cultural and interpretational problems, Muslim women, if not all, a significant number of them who wish to perform their basic familial responsibilities and also wish to participate in the public life, suffer miserably. They do not get proper and conducive family environment to play a dynamic role in the family and society.

Life Between Family and Workplace: Different Patterns

It is hard to identify and present the number of patterns which working women manifest in handling the familial work on one side, and performing their respective works at the workplace. However, three general and broad patterns are described below to comprehend the problems. These patterns reflect the perspective of Muslim women of familial work and the outside work, and the cooperation or non-cooperation of men in the familial work:

1. Work-a-holic and Damaging

Here those women can be included who are more or less influenced by the extreme feminist perspective which emphasize the public role of women at the loss of the familial role. Such women tend to be work-a-holic and spend more time and energy in the workplace and give no time, or lesser time to family work. In such cases, if men are also work-a-holic and tend to be careless husbands and fathers, the children are the poor victims. The children find that their parents are too busy in material pursuits and have no time for them for proper interaction. Generally, children of such parents become alcoholic or drug addicts and also get involved in illicit sexual relations. This is how social evils increase in the society which eventually brings moral degeneration of the society. Such parents destroy their own children and damage their own societies. The main reason behind such

an attitude of men and women is the lack of clear understanding of the Islamic perspective on family work and the outside work.

2. Hectic and Challenge Facing

Here, those women can be included who possess clear perception of Islam on family work and the work outside. They like to participate actively in the public sphere while performing their basic familial responsibilities. But they do not get any moral support and cooperation from men in the familial work. Thus they race in two directions family work on one side, and outside work on the other. For this reason life becomes hectic and they face a great challenge to manage and tackle both works. In such case, Muslim women face such problems because of the lack of clear understanding of the Islamic perspective of their husbands regarding their familial role and public role. Children of such families face enormous problems in the families, seeing the deplorable condition of their mother due to the clash of perspectives between their parents.

3. Systematic and Balancing Pattern

Here those women can be included whose Islamic perspective on family and outside work is clear and who also get cooperation from men in housework. They also enjoy due appreciation on their indoor and outdoor works. Obviously, such cooperation and appreciation from men are possible due to the clear perspective of men regarding family and outside work. Here, women as wives/ mothers/ outside workers and men as husbands/ fathers/ outside workers try to systematize and organize all their indoor and outdoor works to bring balance in their life between family and workplace. Children of such families generally enjoy a peaceful and healthy environment to concentrate on their studies and Islamic learning to be the future leaders of Muslim societies.

Conclusion

From the overall discussion, it is quite evident that neither the familial institutions should be devalued nor the positive contribution of women in the public sphere

should be discouraged. To this effect, there is an urgent need to clarify the misconceptions which surround the issue of participation of women in the society and the cooperation of men in familial work. These misconceptions can be clarified only when the differences between the Islamic perspective and the narrow and confused cultural norms be disentangled from each other. Along with the conceptual clarification, there is an urgent need for attitudinal change in men towards women in the family and at the work force, proper communication with women and children.

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