

The Extended Family

IT is quite possible that some women may not incline towards married life and happiness as envisaged by Islam. Some women have a penchant for different kinds of career, for art, science or some productivity other than is usually associated with married home life. This need is not new. It did not start with the industrial revolution which extricated woman from her home to work in office and factory. The need is as old as humanity, and has raised problems before women's careers took them outside their homes. However, the problem is more often than not that the career-bound woman wants to have both marriage, home and children as well as a career, and finds the two irreconcilable.

To relieve woman from having to have a career in order to provide for herself, Islam prescribed support for woman whether minor or adult, by her nearest male relative on equal level as his own. This prescription is not suspended except when she marries. Then, her support falls upon her husband. When divorced or widowed, the prescription still holds, except when she is pregnant or nursing a child. In that case, her "husband" is obliged by law to support her and her child for two years after childbirth. Since she is thus well provided for all the length of her life, Islam prescribed that woman would inherit only half the share of the male.

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Nonetheless, there are women for whom even this economic guarantee is not sufficient. Some women are creative and their creativity may well demand external occupation for self-fulfillment. If she is the sole female adult living in a cellular family, either her career or her home has to bear the cost. One of the two has to give in. Otherwise, she can have both only in succession, children and home in the early period of her married life, and career in the later period. But long absence from the period of learning and advanced age might have already ruined her chances for a great creative career. In this case, she would more likely be able to do supportive service as a secretary, assistant, sales clerk or factory hand. If she were to take up her career in her prime age, the children would have to suffer; and so would the happiness of the home. Home is not only a bedroom and a kitchen. To fulfill themselves, humans need beauty, a measure of home-leisure where beauty of ambiance combines with friendly converse and pleasant activity. This is not likely to be available in homes where both parents are out working. Such parents would not be prepared to give each other the quiescence needed by each of them.

It would be otherwise if the home also contained other adult males and females, if it were an “extended family” home. Parents, sisters and brothers, grandparents, uncles and aunts, would give the home of the career-woman all the care it needs without her having to feel a wit obliged or superfluous. For the home equally belongs to all. If she has a child, the love and attention the relatives give is a blessing because of the blood-relation. This does not necessarily prevent her from putting her own touch to her quarters or to the home as a whole, nor from taking her children into her own motherly care after her work hours. The point is that in her absence, the house is not left unattended, or attended by foreign servants; and the children are not left to the internet, television set, the foreign babysitter or the “day-care center.”

Moreover, the variety of characters and personalities, of moods and temperaments in the extended family home, provides for everybody the opportunity to do what he pleases in company of those who love him most. Be his or her mood one of joy and merrymaking, of despondency and crying, of friendly converse or meditation, of hard work or rest, of an outdoor promenade or a close *tete-a-tete*, husband, wife, son

or daughter would nearly always find someone in the extended family to join him or her in that activity. If the mood is one of isolation and withdrawal, that too is permitted without offense or guilt, for the people in question are one's beloved, one's near relatives. Such company is absolutely essential for personal sanity and social health. Humans need love, counsel, company and altruistic concern as much as they need food and air. Total privacy can be obtained only at the cost of loneliness and is unworthy of it. The consequences of loneliness far outweigh the satisfaction which privacy sometimes furnishes.

Not only does the extended family make careers outside the home, as well as inside when the career is executed at home, possible but it makes the whole of society healthier. The extended family is the best guarantee against psychic ills and aberrations of all sorts. Islam has not only recommended it as good. It has buttressed it with laws. Every human in need, it prescribed, is entitled to the support of his nearest relative. In complement of this it prescribed that a person's legal heirs are not only one's spouse and children, but vertically in both directions, all his living parents and grandparents, and all his grandchildren and their children. All these members of the family are hence kept together by love as well as by law.