

THE FEASIBILITY OF EXTENDED FAMILY AND ITS ROLE IN EMPOWERING MUSLIM WOMEN

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ABSTRAK

Tidak dapat dipertikaikan lagi bahawa Islam mengangkat taraf wanita dan menawarkan perspektif baharu pemeraksanaan wanita, berdasarkan konsep yang unik iaitu kesaksamaan dan keadilan. Selain itu, Islam juga telah memperkenalkan konstruk sosial baharu yang meraikan peranan, hak dan penyertaan wanita dalam kedua-dua bidang domestik dan awam. Penyertaan wanita dalam tenaga kerja tidak dapat dielakkan pada masa kini, namun mereka menghadapi masalah untuk mengimbangi dan menyesuaikan diri antara kerjaya dan urusan keluarga. Celik huruf wanita Malaysia meningkat dengan pesat daripada 78.5% pada tahun 1990 kepada 92.1% pada tahun 2013 dan sekitar 61% daripada pelajar universiti adalah wanita. Ironinya, terdapat sesetengah wanita sebagai tenaga kerja mengalami masalah keluarga. Pada 2014, hampir satu perlima (18.7%) wanita yang sedang bekerja menghadapi masalah dalam mengimbangi antara kerjaya dan keluarga dan pada 2017, hanya 53.5% wanita yang menyertai tenaga buruh. Dalam Islam, institusi keluarga memainkan

peranan penting dalam meningkatkan kemajuan wanita dan menyediakan persekitaran yang lebih baik untuk ibu bekerja yang terlibat dalam pembangunan negara. Struktur 'extended family' dalam institusi keluarga Islam memainkan peranan penting sebagai penyelesaian praktikal untuk konflik kerja-keluarga, sekali gus meningkatkan pemerkasaan dan produktiviti wanita dalam masyarakat. Justeru ia harus diketengahkan semula dan diamalkan sewajarnya bagi memudahkan wanita berjaya dan membina masyarakat yang harmoni.

Kata Kunci: Pemerkasaan Wanita, Wanita Bekerja, Keluarga Besar, Peranan Keluarga

THE FEASIBILITY OF EXTENDED FAMILY AND ITS ROLE IN EMPOWERING MUSLIM WOMEN

ABSTRACT

Islam uncontestedly had elevated women status and offered a new perspective of women empowerment, based on the unique concept of equality and justice. Moreover, it had also introduced a new social construct that celebrated women's roles, rights and participations in both domestic and public spheres. Women's participation in the workforce is inevitable nowadays, yet they are facing problems to balance and juggle between career and family affairs. Malaysian women literacy increased tremendously from 78.5% in 1990 to 92.1% in 2013 and around 61% of the university students are women. Ironically there are fewer women in the workforce due to family issues. In 2014, almost one-fifth (18.7%) of currently working women are facing problems in balancing between career and family and in 2017, only 53.5% of women participated in the labour force. In Islam, family institution plays a vital role in enhancing women's progress and preparing a better environment for working mothers to participate in nation building. The extended family structure in Islamic family institution plays a vital role as a practical solution for the work-family conflicts, thus enhancing women empowerment and productivity in society and public realms. Hence it should be revived and practiced accordingly to facilitate working women and build a harmonious society.

Keywords: *Women Empowerment, Working Women, Extended Family, Family Roles*

INTRODUCTION

Since Malaysia proclaimed her commitment to promote the UN CEDAW in 1995, (Abdullah, 2012) and other UN Declaration on Women to work for the equality, development and peace for all women, women participation in Malaysia workforce had increased from 44.7% in 1995 to 52.4% in 2013.

Several incentives were offered, and proactive approaches were taken by the government to achieve up to 55% of women participation in labor in 2015 and at least 30% women decision-maker in public sector. This includes the 1Malaysia Support for Housewives, Housewives Enhancement (1MH4HW) and Reactivate Talent Scheme (HEARTS). However, the increase in women's achievement in education for the past 10 years does not parallel with women's participation in workforce. Malaysian women literacy increased tremendously from 78.5% in 1990 to 92.1% in 2013, and around 61% of the University students are women, ironically there are fewer women in the workforce. In 2017, only 53.5% of women participated in the labour force. According to the National statistics, there are several underlying factors for women's leave from workforce. Besides the earlier retirement age and furthering studies, more than 60% of women leaving their work due to family issues and conflicts.

In Islam, family institution plays a vital role in empowering women and facilitating a better environment for working mothers. More importantly, extended family is a vital social institution that provides various aspects of supports for working women. Thus, this article aims to discuss the roles and functions of Islamic extended family institution as a feasible solution for working mothers' problems and conflicts.

EMPOWERING WOMEN: AN ISLAMIC APPROACH

As a matter of fact, women empowerment is not an issue in Islam, and women's fight for rights and better treatment is indeed unnecessary in a Muslim society which practices the true tenets of this religion. Throughout human's history, Islam had been acknowledged as a religion that elevated women status and offered a new perspective pertaining women, based on the unique concept of equality and justice. It had also introduced a new social construct, which celebrates women's roles, rights and participations in both domestic and public sectors long before the emancipation movement and Feminism struggles. Since the advent of Islam, patriarchal traditions and customs of previous Arab society had gradually been diminished from the practice of *ummah*. Islam also denounces all sort of discrimination towards women and men alike, and women had been given rights and opportunities in every aspects of life, which were denied form them previously.

It is important to highlight that Islam emphasizes on the participation of both men and women in nation building and development of the civilization (Kausar, 2007). Maulana Wahiduddin Khan (1994) maintains that Islamic precepts for men and women are based on their different natural constitutions and this leads to societal division of labor. In other words, as suggested by Khalif Muammar & Adibah (2014 & 2019), men and women are created from the same one soul (*min nafs wahidah*) like the two sides of a coin, which signifies the inter-dependency on each other. They are created in pairs to build a family through marriage and subsequently raise righteous descendants. Women are also the *khalifah* (vicegerent) of God like men, for the same reasons,

purposes, responsibilities and tasks. Based on the complementary roles of men and women, women play a dynamic role in both familial and public spheres.

Meanwhile, Al-Siba'i (2010) concludes that women empowerment in Islam is addressed within three main aspects: humanity, societal and legal aspects. Women are regarded equal to men as both are from the same human origin and should be treated with equal dignity and respect. This denotes that women, as human beings should never be regarded as inferior to men due to her femininity. They are also positioned with honor and dignity at various phases of their lives and enjoy unlimited opportunity in seeking knowledge, exercising their rights and exploring their potentials. In some aspect and condition, men are supposed to be leaders and guardians to women, but this does not suggest that Islam condone discrimination, bias or demeaning women as second class citizens. Women's presence and participation in society are acceptable and encouraged provided they are in compliance with the Islamic teachings and regulations. Not to mention, in legal aspect, particularly in property ownership and transactions, women possess full ownership and freedom of act as men do.

It is essential to accentuate that women empowerment in Islam has a distinctive perspective and constructed from a different framework of the West. The concept of gender, equality, family and society as advocated by Islam are constructed from Islamic worldview, which is based on *Tauhid*. For instance, Islam views gender roles and gender relations as divine orders in accordance with the distinguished nature of men and women. Whereas from Western perspective, gender roles are simply socially constructed (Glover & Kaplan, 2009). Likewise, equality as highlighted by Islam entails balance and justice, which does not necessarily connote sameness between men and women in every sphere of life (Khalif & Adibah, 2019). Empowering women does not entail expecting them to function, behave or act similar to men in all aspects. Rather, it's a way for women to explore and enhance their own nature, capacities and abilities without involving in gender rivalry.

Scrutinizing the history of the Prophet and his companions, we found many evidences of great Muslim women's participation in societal and public affairs, including The Prophets' wives and *sahabiah*. Muslim women back then were empowered spiritually, intellectually and legally like 'A'ishah (613-678), Umm Salamah (596-683) dan Hafsa (605-665). Nowadays, women's participation in workforce are inevitable due to the economic factors and family survival. Moreover, women nowadays are enjoying more privileges and wider opportunities in education. Inasmuch as Islam does not forbid Muslim women from doing works other than household chores in public sphere, it is fundamental to ensure that her career or job does not compromise her roles and responsibilities in the family (al-Siba'i, 2010). The debate on whether or not women are allowed to work outside the house is also irrelevant as Muslim scholars have come out with a profound conclusion on this issue. Above all, it is more important to discuss on how women can get the effective and tangible support system in order to empower themselves and serve the nation.

EXTENDED FAMILY AS A TANGIBLE SUPPORT SYSTEM

Family institution is considered the underlying pillar of a society and the ground for carrying out the vicegerent duties; hence great emphasis is laid on ensuring its unity, harmony and sustainability (Lamya', 2002; Shifa', 2013; Terraza, 2015). Moreover, having a family is also the fundamental purpose of marriage in Islam. It is undeniable that marriage is a part of human nature and sexual needs; hence the explicit discussion of familial life in surah al-Nahl verse 72, in which Allah SWT accentuates the divine purposes of marriage. There are also an abundance of Qur'anic verses pertaining to the ethical aspects of the relationship between husband and wife, parents and children, and also their respective rights and roles, in order to sustain a harmonious family institution. This profoundly proposes the significance of family institution in both personal and societal realms.

In line with this, Lamya' al-Faruqi in her treatise *Women, Muslim Society and Islam* (2002) summarized the characteristic of a society as illustrated in the Qur'an: 1) Equal status and worth of both sexes, which comprises religious matters, ethical obligations and rewards, education and legal rights. 2) Dual sex rather than unisex society, which indicates both men and women are assigned with their special responsibilities for the healthy functioning of the society. 3) Interdependence of the members of society. 4) The extended family institution, which provides benefits for both men and women particularly at societal level.

In Islam, extended family plays a fundamental role in enhancing men-women relations and also serves as a catalyst for the development of a society. Al-Qur'an explicates the three types of relations among family members: relation based on birth and blood ties (parents-children), relation due to marriage and also relation in an extended family (Rola al-heet, 2015). The Muslim extended family, of which often been mentioned as *a'ilah*, *al-usrah al-mumtaddah* or *al-usrah al-wasi'ah* in Arabic language comprises three or four generations of mutually inter-dependent individuals who are commonly nucleated in a single residence or proximate accommodations (Al-Faruqi, 2002 & al-Shaltuni, 2005). Whether or not these families live together in the same building or compound, the connections of family members are stronger psychologically, socially and economically. The concept of extended family in Islamic teachings is not confined to several generations of family members living under one same roof (Shifa' Ali Faqih, 2013), as it will only restrict the dynamics of the 'extended' relation between all the family members.

Islam has ordained a well-defined and manifest code for family institution and family life. The extended family as a concept and also culture is described in al-Qur'an in various accounts: in reference to the rights of kin, (17: 23-26; 4: 7-9; 8:41; 24:22), inheritance portions, (2: 180-182; 4: 33 and 176) and also many others. Thus, it is not merely an important structure of a family institution, but also functions as a dynamic support system emphasizing on rights, responsibilities and roles of each member.

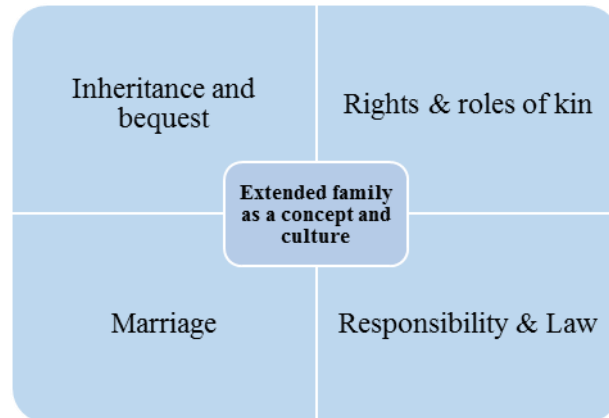


Diagram 1: Extended Family as a Concept and Culture in al-Qur'an

However, due to the shift of worldviews and ideologies, emergence of industrialization, urbanization and socio-economic transformations, the marginalized extended family structure has not been practiced widely in modern societies. Many young couples nowadays are reluctant to live with their extended family members or their own parents to have their own privacy and freedom. On top of that, career development and progress are sought after by the younger generations at the expense of family bonding. Factors contributed to this trend includes the modern - materialism ideology, the loosening of bonds and guardianship among family members, distance or detachment from religious teachings and advancement in technology which isolates human being from real life (al-Shaltuni, 2015). This phenomenon somehow brings grave disadvantages for both the younger as well as the older generation.

The benefits of Islamic extended family are numerous and self-evident. The *'a'ilah* does not only has a social function, but it also provides mutual aids or assistance for its members, emotionally and economically. For women with demanding careers, the presence of extended family allows them to work outside home with the ease of mind, without having to leave their spouse, children or parents unattended and with disadvantages. As they enjoy support, assistance and solidarity from other extended family members whom they know well and trust, the emotional and physical burden of a career woman can be lifted, since the spouse and children needs are fulfilled and taken care of. Some of the household chores may also be shared and accomplished together with other family members based on mutual understanding.

In Malaysia, there is an alarming increase of child abuse cases by guardians and caregivers. In 2018, there are 5578 reported cases and the statistic increases to 6061 cases in 2019. Working mothers may find themselves in quandary and feel unsecured leaving their children under the care of strangers. Conversely, working mothers may find it more tranquil and reassured if their children are put under the care of their own family members, or left in the child nursery nearby any next of kin. Thus, this can also contribute to the decrease of child abuse cases under the care of caregivers and eventually increase the

efficiency of working women. From another aspect, it is also through extended family that cultural identity, the positive family's tradition, sets of rules and noble virtues can be conveyed and transmitted to the younger generations (Al-Awad & Sonuga-Barke, 1992; Shifa', 2013).

Living with extended family also helps in reducing the generation gap between family members. The younger generation will learn to respect the elderlies, while at the same time can benefit from their invaluable life experiences and wisdom (Shifa', 2015). Many social problems aroused when each generation became isolated from each other and interaction and communication became more unsuccessful or less meaningful (al-Faruqi, 2002). Al- Awad and Sonuga-Barke (1992) in their research on the relation of emotional and social development and family structure of children in Khartoum revealed that children in nuclear family had more conduct, emotional and other problems compared to those living in extended family. This is due to several factors, particularly the role of grandmother in childcare and socialization as a protective characteristic of an extended family.

In the case of parents or elderlies who need to be taken care of by their younger offspring, living together with children or grandchildren provides a more feasible solution. A career woman, having enough work commitments at hand and struggling to cater the needs of her spouse and children at home, will find it more arduous to take care of her aging parents or parents in laws at the same time, who live far away. However, in extended family structure, living together or nearby other immediate family members can assist her to juggle her responsibilities and be a more efficient multi-tasking person. On a side note, extended family as an economic support is observed when a married woman becomes a widow or a single parent. If she lives with her extended family members, not only her emotional burden will be eased, but also her economic state will improve. In Islam, the next of kin or brothers of the woman are held responsible to support and take care of her. If she has children, the next of kin of the late husband are responsible to support those children. This unique support system from extended family is an instance of how Islamic laws and rulings emphasize on women's welfare.

CONCLUSION

Islam as a comprehensive way of life, has been divinely revealed to mankind in a perfect form in all aspects of live. Islam offers practical solutions to every matters of life, and it encompasses laws and regulations in accordance with human's needs and nature. Similar to men, women are also been given dynamic space and opportunity to develop their potentials and to participate in the development of the nation, provided that they are within the framework of religion and complies with their unique female nature.

Women empowerment is something that could not be ignored or impeded. Towards becoming a developed country, women are becoming the main workforce in nation building. Women also play undeniably important roles as decision makers in public sectors, which inevitably could raise more

conflicts, bring bigger challenges and greater implications on women, family and society alike. For a married working woman, the extended family structure in the Islamic family institution plays a vital role as a practical solution for the work-family conflicts, thus enhancing a woman's empowerment and productivity in society and public realm. Extended family system benefits every family member respectively, hence it should be revived and practiced accordingly in order to facilitate working women and build a harmonious society. The government agencies and all other respective NGOs should start advocating the roles and importance of extended family in the society and enhancing the practice of living and reconnecting with extended family members among younger generations.

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