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**Changes in the family**

As a teacher of sociology, I have observed the changes taking place in the family structure of Pakistan for quite some time.

Noted architect and town planner Arif Hasan mentioned in his research that by the year 1998, around 89 percent of families in Karachi were nuclear, while in 1989 the figure was a mere 54 percent. It has been noted that economic imperatives, assertion of autonomy, global aspirations and careerism or the ‘professionalization of everyone’ are the causal factors for neo-locals.

Students of political and social sciences are also told that prima facie this transition is an urban phenomenon and has a deep impact on service-providing institutions, housing and land use issues and the social order of the cities. This article is an extract of observations on selected nuclear families, discussion with working mothers of nuclear families and anecdotal evidence – with an aim to initiate more discussions on an important and evolving phenomenon in Pakistani society.

Division of labour within family: In dual-career nuclear families, the division of labour is somewhat evolving towards a more balanced equation between the two working partners. The new metrosexuals are more caring, in relative terms, towards their spouses and share the burden of daily chores as well. The sharing is still skewed, though, with male partners involved in less cumbersome, patience-testing tasks and women taking care of instrumental work at home.

Increased reliance on domestic help: Covid-19 exposed the issue of dependence of households on domestic help. Besides the severity and lethality of the pandemic, one of the most important discussions among a certain set of people during last year’s lockdown was how to cope with the unavailability of one’s maids. It was observed that in the extended family daily chores such as cleaning, cooking, washing, dusting were distributed among the human resources at disposal (though admittedly the distribution of work was gender biased). Gone with the extended family is that internal human resource pool; in nuclear family setups the entire house is contracted out to maids and other residential or visiting servants.

The lost connection: The elderly suffer. In many cases, at least one parent lives with a young couple but due to day-to-day intense occupations, attention is hard to find. In many cases, if healthy, older people’s roles are reduced to chowkidars or ayas of the house. In case of chronic ailments, their care becomes a burden and a source of stress for the entire household. It also happens that the couple has to move around the country and across the world, thus losing everyday contact with those left behind.

Loss of value system transmission conduit: With the loss of grandparents comes the loss of the most effective value transmission system: the before-going-to-the-bed, storytelling by the grandmother. Weaved with the fabric of wisdom, packaged in simple words, told in a psychologically sensitive manner, those stories talked about rewards of honesty, about sacrifice for others, respect for elders and much more. The personal and affectionate touch and company of the old is replaced by an impersonal and cold-like-dead electronic gadgetry, with no moral lessons in it: only gaming and game playing.

Ease in the approval of spouse: With the increasing participation of young girls in public spheres and economic independence is the freedom (though not without restricting parameters of sect and faith) to select their spouse. It is true that the candidate has still to pass through formal channels of token approval. More true is the robustness of pompous and traditional mechanisms of declaration of marriage and its consumption. The task of the boys/girls, nevertheless, has become much easier in a nuclear family as compared to the extended family where many stakeholders used to assert their respective opinions on the choice of spouses and the methods of marriage ceremonies.

Luncheon discussions: Burdened with the guilt of ‘leaving them alone’, working mothers in nuclear families can be observed discussing their children, their adventures and aspirations at their workplace. They can also be seen making phone calls during the day to their domestic help ascertain their children’s wellbeing or just to know who has opened the door for the returning kids from schools.

Alone in emotional labour: Despite all the care by millennial men, women have to carry the major chunk of domestic tasks such as childcare, irrespective of their occupational and job status. And yet at the same time they have to invest large amounts of emotional labour in maintaining extended family relationships and look after the elderly. There is no other woman in the house to share their load of emotional labour; since the support system of the elderly is gone long ago.

The little discussed dark side: The increased isolation from larger family relationships results in intense privacy, resulting in less vigil by elders. This puts more demand on efforts to prevent child abuse, sexual abuse and domestic violence. The challenges of parenting have also increased and result in elevated stress levels of parents.

Clustered dwelling: It has been observed that in a considerable number of cases, couples prefer to opt for dwelling in such areas where on the one hand they can avail services easily and also when the new place is somewhere close to some maternal relatives or in-laws. Close enough to be asked for help (in case of emergency) and distant enough to be non-interfering in the household.

It is important to note that this is not a defence of the extended family system. The effort is to gain a deeper understanding of the changes associated with a fast-consolidating nuclear family system in major urban centers and small towns of Pakistan. Once the change and its impacts start becoming clear, the debate can be moved to the next level of how to redirect those changes to the befit of the people.

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