**Questions of happiness**

[**Dr Abdus Sattar Abbasi**](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/dr-abdus-sattar-abbasi)

March 01, 2023

Human progress has transformed innumerable concepts of life on this planet and even beyond. We are witnessing unprecedented scientific and technological revolutions for the last hundred years which according to some estimates have gained exceptional pace and now every decade represents a century in terms of knowledge expansion and growth. Social norms have also evolved; there are several dimensions of social life which surprise us that were unimaginable just a century ago. History of mankind suggests that market forces do influence the shaping up of societal values but it seldom happens that a custom once transformed returns to the past.

The industrial revolution led to women’s liberation and empowerment movements aiming for gender equity and equality. Our generation witnessed hot debates on gender roles which still continue but not to that extent probably due to behavioural adjustments or turnaround in our approaches. Debate on gender specialisation is used to conclude on expressions such as conservative, old-fashioned, orthodox, traditional and whatnot. Domesticity and housewifery were synonymous with oppression and exploitation. Women’s education was promoted with the belief that employment would liberate women from unfair family responsibilities. So much so that some enthusiastic activists started demanding that mankind should search for possibilities of sharing childbearing pains with both genders.

[Met office forecasts dry weather](https://www.nation.com.pk/28-Mar-2023/met-office-forecasts-dry-weather)

Nevertheless, the spirit of the entire debate remained economic well-being leading to happiness with the active contributions of both men and women. Despite the fact that contemporary sociology suggests structural-functionalism offering an essentialist defence for gender specialisation leaving childbearing to women with expressive roles within the home and the instrumental leadership in the occupational system to men, still the dichotomy of thoughts continues.

Scientific data suggests that in spite of the drudgery associated with stereotypically female work around the house, many women do, in fact, report personal gratification and meaning in the activities of caring for home and family. According to a few studies more married women achieved prestigious, highly paid and presumably meaningful careers due to increased women’s labour force participation. However, contrary to the early feminists’ expectations the general happiness of American and European women declined—at least as compared to men’s.

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Judith Treas from the University of California and her colleagues contend, “Research has yet to resolve whether the relationship between women’s life satisfaction and their paid employment is positive or negative. Theoretically, homemaking has been described as rewarding not only by gender conservatives but also by contemporary feminists who champion the value of unpaid caring labour. This contradicts the liberal feminist view of homemaking, which emphasises the demoralising aspects of domestic tedium and a restricted social role. As for paid work, there are arguments that women’s labour force participation undermines their life satisfaction and equally firm contentions that it promotes their well-being. Questions such as these need attention: Are homemakers happier than working women? If so, is this relationship dependent on mediating factors, such as the division of household labour? Does the relationship hold across countries? Or, do some countries have features that alter the gains of homemaking or buffer the strains of paid work?”

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According to some other studies during this millennium, “Normative pressures and role conflicts are invoked as reasons that housewives will be happier. Social conservatives and cultural feminists hold that satisfaction comes from fulfilling traditional gender roles. A wife’s employment will erode her well-being if her paid work is out of step with the gender conventions of her social world. Public opinion still questions the advisability of married women’s paid work, at least full-time employment when children are preschoolers. Because of disproportionate responsibilities for the home, children and family-employed women are vulnerable to dissatisfaction arising from the stress of work-family conflict. The strain results from diminished time available to satisfy household demands. Mothers who report having insufficient time with loved ones have lower well-being than others. There are work-to-home spillovers, such as fatigue and emotional upsets which contribute to the dissatisfaction of working women.”

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Studies in developed countries do serve as an eye-opener to determine the effectiveness of our century’s long struggle to ensure women’s participation in economic activities. These countries being leaders of such movements are reporting disappointing results. U.S. panel data confirm that married women who move into full-time employment are less happy with their marriages than housewives. Australian women who shift into full-time employment experience a decline in life satisfaction. In Germany, where the breadwinner-homemaker model is entrenched, single-earner couples, who conform to this model, are happier than two-earner couples.

Probably we need to look at our traditional and religious perspectives to understand the outcomes of these modern-day studies which emphasise gender-specific roles. Because according to contemporary researchers such as Petra Boehnke from the University of Hamburg Germany, religiosity is positively related to life satisfaction. On the other hand, according to researchers such as Kei Nomaguchi from Bowling Green State University Ohio and her colleagues, working mothers, and children exacerbate perceptions of time deficits leading to dissatisfaction.

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Happiness is a complex phenomenon; we can’t categorically conclude that homemaking is the only factor that guarantees happiness. However, overemphasis and exceptional campaigning under the umbrella of liberalism can’t promise satisfaction for women. We need to remain pragmatic while considering alternatives to determine appropriate choices in life. A balanced and rational analysis of situations linked with ground realities can help married couples negotiate gender roles for a happy and peaceful life. In my opinion, it is a little too much to demand equal participation in the economic realm from women when they are already contributing significantly and probably more than equal share to mankind by raising families and managing domestic lives. Now we have started understanding that doing jobs besides childbearing and domestic responsibilities is actually a kind of exploitation, not liberation. We need to remain just and recognise that women should be allowed and facilitated to perform their gender-specific roles conveniently without any coercion to contribute to the earning of a family.