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**Work and the family**

As an observer of changes in family structures in Pakistan, I can state with a certain level of confidence that the changes in family structure are happening at a fast pace and are a source of tension among various stakeholders of the institution of the family.

Students of sociology attribute these changes to the direction of the economic development of the country, advancement in technology, globalization-steered aspirations of the youth, and higher educational attainment of students, particularly girls.

Historically, and more evident in agrarian setups, productive work was not only compatible with family life and also strengthened family relationships. With the change in means and modes of production, the life conditions that generated the earlier observed family form have changed, and so has the family. The impact of such changes, which some refer to as a ‘decline in the traditional family system’ are as lucid as their causes. Experts say that there is an alarming increase in juvenile delinquency, violence, suicide, substance abuse, eating disorders, psychological stress, loneliness and unipolar depression.

The role of the social family unit merits a recap before one takes stock of what has been changed. The traditional family is accustomed to playing three major roles: procreation, socialization and transmission of value systems. By and large, procreation still remains the prerogative of the institution of the legally notified and socially sanctioned family (though, my friend Faisal Edhi mentioned that his late father, the well-respected Adul Sattar Edhi, had to place jhoolas or baby cradles outside Edhi centers to mitigate the infanticide of out-of-wedlock children and baby-girls), the effect is most on the other two functions: socialization and transmission of the value system.

Over the past 40 years, the traditional extended family changed to the ‘traditional nuclear family’ (husband away for work and wife taking care of the home and children full time) and then to the modern nuclear family (both spouses working and the care of the children either contracted out to a maid or becomes the responsibility of nearby-living grandparents).

The following noticeable manifestations can be clearly seen. First, ‘until death do us apart” is not operating at maximum efficiency. Divorce rates are increasing and as a result, an increasing number of children are being raised in single-parent households. A lot of factors are attributed as the cause of the ever-increasing broken families, and all of those must be valid, resulting in more single care-provider households for children. Covid-19 and the resulting joblessness, it is feared, will further contribute to breaking up families.

Second, an increasing number of married women are no longer full-time housewives and mothers. Financial imperatives and the desire for fulfillment are the reasons and it is important to mention that their former roles have not been fully replaced with equally viable alternatives.

Third, with ever-increasing competition for dwindling resources for the people, the value system adjusts to the new conditions of life. A couple of tectonic shifts, as happened in the traditional value system, is worth mentioning: the tendency of self-fulfillment over spirit of sacrifice; aggressiveness over compassion; career over social bonds; opportunism over dwindling principles; and above all personal preference over the expense of collective interest. Family as a prime conduit for the intergenerational transmission of the value system is forced to adopt the emerging values system for survival and for its members not to be social outcasts.

Karachi is dependent on the industrial sector and the service economy for its financial survival. This industrial and service sector has subtly created an imbalance between market and non-market activities. Fathers coming back late from work leaves little time and space for family time. By the time they reach home, they are tired, exhausted and mentally occupied with the plans for the next day on the job.

Working mothers have dual jobs to perform, which usually takes a toll on their health. It is unfortunate that the time children spend with adults is dropping down exponentially. Electronic gadgets and cartoon channels are an increasing crutch to keep children busy and diverted, but they cannot be a replacement for what the older generation used to call child-rearing. The time spent in purchasing goods from malls and big stores at some distance from the house, at times for valid reasons, often substitutes for family time. Cell phones intrude into family life and your boss has the right to call you at any time and one is obliged to answer it, so as not to earn the wrath of the powerful.

The above-mentioned observations need to be investigated more for better understanding and a viable solution to address the conflict between earning a living and provision of adequate social and emotional support to the prime unit of state: family. And for one more reason. The hostility to women’s economic independence is a constant feature of the conversations and writings of family values crusaders. This aggression expresses itself in various narratives, ranging from the very traditional notion of ‘the right place for women is home’ to the notion of labelling some occupations as ‘appropriate for women’ and to the sequencing that ‘women should be allowed to work before or after child rearing’.

It is feared that if work environments are not reworked to accommodate social requirements, women will be more disadvantaged and will carry further the burden of the shifting sands of the family institution. In the absence of any change in work policies, individuals, under survival instincts, will make some stopgap arrangements and solutions. These solutions of course cannot be treated as permanent solutions.

It can be concluded safely that the traditional family has almost gone and will never come back again. Work environments respond slowly to the changes happening on the social front, thus creating a lag between work advancements and the social progress of the unit of the family. Thus, the prevalent work environment is responsible for the social tensions associated with the unit of the family and is insensitive to the requirements of a coherent and productive family unit. It needs to be reworked for political programmes and policy improvements for this future. Ignorance in this case will not prove to be a bliss for society.

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