

# Marriage

## *Muslim Women Working Outside the Home*

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### **Pros, Cons, and Possible Solutions**

Many families, especially in the West, consider it normal and even necessary for the wife to have a job outside the home---either to make ends meet or to make it possible for the family to maintain a certain quality of life. Presented below is an Islamic view on women working outside the home.

### **Disintegration of Families:**

However, the family in the West is disintegrating, and many believe that this lifestyle is a major part of the problem. With the mother and father both working outside the home, the children's lives are often filled with loneliness, lack of training, and perhaps frustration and anger with their rarely present parents. These children are often left in the hands of baby-sitters (some good, some not-so-good, and some really bad) and the infamous one-eyed baby-sitter, the TV. The parents goal of improving their family's financial situation by having two breadwinners often backfires, and the family is sometimes harmed or destroyed in the process.

### **Muslim Households Affected by Western Lifestyle**

Muslims in the West are now beginning to face this same problem. Many Muslim women are now pursuing higher education and careers in such fields as medicine, law, education, computers, and engineering. When they get married, they may want to continue working in their chosen profession.

### **Potential Problems for Ladies Working Outside their Homes**

Depending on how the situation is handled, this could cause major upheavals in the Muslim family. Several potential problems might arise.

The husband may feel jealous or worried about his wife who has the chance of being flirted with by male coworkers, forced at times to work alone with males, or even sexually harassed at work, Although wearing hijab, conducting herself in a purely professional manner, and drawing the line with male coworkers when necessary may prevent these problems, the potential for danger is still there.

### **Less Quality Time Together**

Moreover, with both husband and wife employed outside the home, the opportunities for the husband and wife to spend quality time together may be dramatically decreased, especially if they have different work hours.

### **Household Responsibilities Unattended**

A major problem that often comes up in this kind of marriage is determining who is responsible for certain aspects of taking care of the household. Although it might be possible to hire a person to help with the cooking and the cleaning of the house, security and privacy might be sacrificed. If a relative is available to help, such as a live-in mother or mother-in-law, it might be easier. However, if nothing like that is available, tension may be inevitable.

Although the husband definitely needs to help in the house, he is the one who has the ultimate responsibility for supporting the family, and he may feel that he should not be expected to work outside the home and cook and clean the house as well. He might feel that since his wife is not obligated to work outside the house and if they don't need the additional income, she should take care of the house. Arguments about household responsibilities are likely to become commonplace.

### **Women Taking Jobs Away from Women**

An indirect problem caused by more and more women working outside the home is that sometimes men, who have the ultimate responsibility for providing financial support to their families, cannot find adequate jobs because so many are taken by women to earn extra income or merely to satisfy their desire to have a career.

These serious problems for the family and the society might occur even before any children are born. They will likely get worse afterward. In addition, other problems will likely arise.

### **Mother's Return to Work May Affect Her Child**

If a child is born, decisions must be made about whether or not the mother will return to work and, if so, when? Some jobs expect the woman to return to work very soon after the child is born. Others may allow her to take off more time to be with her child without the risk of losing her job. In addition, the parents must consider how the mother's returning to work will affect their child. Mildred M. El-Amin writes in *Family Roots: The Quranic View of Family Life*:

"Who Will Care for My Child," an article in the January 1989 edition of *Plain Truth* magazine, written by Sheila Graham, presents some important considerations for new mothers. More and more experts are acknowledging that infants and toddlers do not thrive physically, mentally and emotionally in day-care institutions. Research reveals, "...babies under the care of someone other than their mother for more than 20 hours a week during the first year of life are adversely affected...are insecure and more likely to be excessively aggressive and uncooperative in school."

The article continues, "Human infants acquire more knowledge before they are a year old than they will in any other comparable year of their lives. By the time the baby is 5 or 6 months old, most mental and physical abilities that are acquired will depend upon the response and interest of parents, especially the mother." . . . Too long have women's value as the primary nurturers and educators of their children been devalued and downgraded. Women who choose to stay home with their children must never again feel they need to apologize for their occupation. Many of the devastating problems we see with our children today are rooted in a lack of bonding with parents in the early years of life, particularly a lack of mothering. The needs of new mothers are approached in a much more civilized manner in some other parts of the world than in the United States: In Sweden, following child birth, women receive 90% of their gross income for nine months; Soviet mothers receive full salary for 1 and 1/2 to 2 years, and 50 to 75% for the third year, and are guaranteed their job; British women receive 18 weeks maternity leave; French women receive 16 weeks. In the U.S., the average is one month maternity leave, and often this is without pay. (1991, 192-193)

### **Who Will Take Care of Children**

If both mother and father work outside the home, how will they arrange for taking care of the children? They could try to arrange their schedules so that one parent will always be able to be with the children. However, if they work different shifts so that one can always be home with the children, they will inevitably have very little time to be together as husband and wife and as a family.

### **Hiring a Baby-sitter**

If they hire someone to baby-sit their children, they may sacrifice some of their security, their privacy, and their children's best interest. A baby-sitter can look after their child, but she will not care as much about their child as its parents do. She will have more priorities than

insuring that their child is properly trained and taught. If she spends 8 hours a day with their child, three hours may be spent on the telephone and three watching television. The other two hours their child may be napping. She may be with their child, but it may not be the quality time the child needs and deserves.

### **Screening a Baby-sitter**

In addition, parents must not only be concerned about the quality of the actual baby-sitting, they must be extremely careful about the person they allow to baby-sit their child. They must either have personal knowledge of the person's character and integrity or be able to verify through a reliable source their character and integrity. Merely getting a reference from the baby-sitter and calling is not enough since baby-sitters can use a friend or relative as a fake reference. The parents will be leaving their child with this person. They should not leave their child with someone they would not even trust their car or money with. The same is unfortunately true for day-care centers. In the past years, some day-cares have come under intense scrutiny for their alleged mistreatment and abuse of children. Again, having a relative or very close friend available to watch the children will help. But this is not always possible. With older children, taking them to school during the day will help if the parents work at the same time the child is in school.

### **More Time in Daycare = Less Quality Time with Parents**

No matter how good the care, children who grow up with baby-sitters and in day-cares and who have little quality time with their mother and father will likely be negatively affected. For some, it may be extremely harmful to their personalities and their development. Parents in this situation will have to decide whether or not the mother's working outside the house is worth the risk.

### **Women Working Outside may Lead to Marital Problems**

For many women, working outside the home will be a major problem and may ultimately lead to separation, divorce, and the destruction of her family.

### **When is it Desirable for Women to Work Outside**

Although the mother's working outside the home is clearly risky, there are situations where it might be necessary. Sometimes, a husband is truly unable to financially support the family alone, and the additional income of the wife is truly necessary. Moreover, some jobs, such as women doctors and nurses for women, are needed by the Muslim community as a whole. Also, some women may feel an emotional need to do some kind of work. They may feel the need to help others, to find solutions to the problems in the world, or to be active members of the society. They may not only want to work because they need the money, but because they feel the need to find an outlet for what they consider their God-given talents and abilities.

In Family Life in Islam, Khurshid Ahmad writes: "A man's major responsibilities lie outside the family. He is to support the family economically and materially . . . . A woman's major responsibilities lie within the family." (34)

Although it seems that Allah (ﷻ) has not required women to go outside and work to support the family, it seems that it is not prohibited in certain circumstances. In Woman in Shariah (Islamic Law), Abdur Rahman I. Doi writes : "Islam does not require women to participate in trade, the vocations or professions unless it is very necessary. . . . [T]he realm of activities for which men and women are created requires a woman to look after her matrimonial home, bring up children in a befitting manner and so on. If she is not neglectful of these duties, or she has reliable household help available to look after her children and relieve her of some of her domestic work, while at the same time she needs a little income to supplement her husband's earning, there is no objection in the Shariah if she goes out to work, but only with the consent of her husband." (147)

## **Question to Ask:**

### **Is Working Outside Beneficial to Family**

The question though does not necessarily come down to whether it is allowed or prohibited in Islam for the woman to work outside the home. Many will be able to establish a position that for them it is allowed. However, the essential question is whether it is beneficial or harmful to the family.

Since many Muslim women today are opting to pursue careers, solutions to the many problems pointed out above must be found.

### **Some Desirable Occupations for Women**

There are several kinds of work that a Muslim woman can do to supplement her or her families income without seriously affecting her family or risking her honor: working from home; teaching women or children; and working as a nurse or doctor especially in obstetrics, gynecology, or pediatrics are a few possibilities.

### **Women can Work From their Homes**

Although in the past, home-based businesses for women often meant child-care, typing, sewing, making clothes, or making handicrafts, the modern trend of the home-office has changed this drastically. Today, many other jobs can be done from home. Writers, editors, artists, software developers, researchers, web-page designers, inventors, publishers, telemarketers, and many others are now able to work in their home-offices. It might even be possible to establish medical businesses from home with doctors or nurses making house calls rather than working in a hospital or medical office.

### **Benefits of Working From Home**

Working in a home-office would also allow the wife and mother to be more flexible with her schedule, to work it around her husband and children's schedules and, thus, provide a better home environment. Encouraging younger women who are preparing for a possible career to choose one that can be done from home would be a wise start toward solving the problem of Muslim working women.

### **Women Working Part-Time in Outside jobs**

However, if Muslim women decide to pursue careers that are not able to be done in the home, they might be encouraged to work only part-time. They can still have a career, but spend more time with the family as well. Since most Muslim women who have careers do not really need the money, and since many companies would be happy to hire them part-time in order to avoid having to provide fringe benefits to them, this is probably a viable solution for many. It would also free up many jobs for men who need them to support their families.

### **Performing Charity Work to Keep Oneself Busy**

If Muslim women just want to work and don't need the money, they can also do charity work as they like on their own schedule. They can utilize their talents and abilities and still have time to devote to their families.

The important thing is that we should start encouraging female Muslims who want to have a career to plan ahead for a career or a work situation that will not cause too much upheaval in the family and that will be best for the children. If they are really concerned about what is best for the wife, the husband, and the children, each family should be able to come up with a plan that can work for all.

### **References and Suggestions for Further Reading**

Abdur Rahman I. Doi, *Woman in Shariah (Islamic Law)*. London: Ta- Ha Publishers Ltd, 1989. Reprinted 1994.

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