

Gender Responsibilities in the light of Allah's Divine Attributes

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In commenting on Allah's saying in the Holy Qur'an, "It is We who have distributed among them their livelihood in the life of this world." (Q 43:32) Imam Ali (as) is reported to have said: "Allah the Exalted told us that employment is one of the means of people's livelihood. He, in His wisdom, diversified their aspirations, motivations, and other such states. Thus He made man's employment of one another one of the means of people's livelihood....If every one of us was forced to build for himself, make his own furniture and produce everything for himself....the conditions in the world would not be bearable, people would not be able to endure them and would find them impossible. But He ensured its management by diversifying their aspirations so that everyone performs for others whatever is within his own capacity in order for some of them to be served by others and for their conditions to be sound." (Wasaa'il al Shi'ah v. 13 p. 244, no. 3). This verse and the exposition of the Imam that follows it indicate that differences in capabilities, talents and capacities are divinely ordained and that no man is an island sufficient unto himself. For this reason human beings naturally organize themselves into society in order to exchange their services for their individual and collective survival. Thus the diversification in "aspirations and motivations" leads to the division of labour, each one fulfilling the needs of another that the latter could not himself fulfil or would have found it extremely difficult to do so if he could.

The most fundamental division of labour in society was based on gender. Men undertook the strenuous tasks of hunting, farming, etc. while women took the responsibilities of work in the home as well as other tasks that did not require great expenditures of physical labour. Thus the division of labour can also be understood as the division between work in the home, and work outside the home. Work outside the home is basically the provision of a required labour or the products of that labour to others in exchange for the labour of others or the goods that they have produced. This "income" is then transferred to the home and is used as an economic support base for the family providing for their maintenance, comfort and social development. Work outside the home is representative of the metaphysical principle of outwardness or the zahiri aspect of reality and as such it conforms to the category of the Divine Names of Majesty, for it revolves around the role of power, competition and aggressiveness in appropriating the resources of the social and natural world. Occupations in this category deal with the most outward aspects of the world; the economy, the earth's resources whether they come from

nature or from man and appropriating them for oneself and one's family.

Work in the home conforms to the Divine Names of Beauty, being representative of the metaphysical principle of inwardness or the batini aspect of reality. It is largely hidden from public view and is fundamentally nurturing in character. It concerns the raising and training of children, and sustaining the family in general by the management of the domestic economy. But it gets even more inward than this for it also involves the maintenance of a healthy spiritual, psychological and emotional environment in the home.

Thus, while work outside the home is "masculine" in character and conforms to the Divine Names of Majesty, work inside the home is "feminine" or conforms to the Divine Names of Beauty. Here it is important to note that the terms "masculine" and "feminine" are qualities and are not gender based, so it would be quite appropriate to describe a man's activity, let's say in sports as feminine without implying that he is effeminate in behaviour. For the "femininity" of his activity could refer to his gracefulness, subtlety and finesse. Similarly one could describe a woman's relationship to her children as masculine in terms of her role as disciplinarian without in any way compromising her individual femininity.

Like all things Islamic, Islamic society is a means of remembering Allah and is therefore a dhikr and being a dhikr it would have to reflect these two divine Names of Beauty and Majesty, or the Inward and the Outward, the Masculine and the Feminine. The human being is the highest locus for the manifestation of the Divine Names in creation and men and women reflect, par excellence the manifestations of the Names of Majesty and Beauty respectively. It is precisely because Islamic society is a reminder or dhikr of Allah that some social functions are the exclusive preserve of men and others of women, not only in their suitability of function but also because they conform to the Way of the Divine Self manifestation. So it is not so much a question of whether a woman has the capability of being a judge, a ruler or a soldier, for especially in this modern period and in living in non Muslim societies it has become clear to us that women are quite capable of performing these roles. It is rather because these roles conform to the Divine Names of Majesty that they are restricted to men. And similarly it is not so much as whether a man could be capable of being an excellent househusband, a child care worker or a practitioner in midwifery, but it is rather that these Names suit the Divine Names of Beauty that they are restricted to women. One can argue that occupations in modern society are now so varied and complex that they cannot fall so neatly within these two polar criteria of Majesty and Beauty. One could accept that hunting is a masculine activity and child rearing is feminine, but what about journalism, business or city planning? The answer is that this

criticism would be true only if we look at all occupations as being rigidly defined by these two criteria, but the vast majority of occupations get their qualities of Majesty and Beauty from the very men and women that are practicing them. Much is being said today, for example, about the difference between female management style and male management styles. That women managed-business would rely more upon consensus as opposed to those run by men that would focus more on the priority of authority and so forth. So it is now being recognized that men and women bring different qualities to occupations that reflect their masculine and feminine traits. So we have in our history, the case of Hazrat Khadija (ra), the illustrious wife of our Prophet (s) who was a businesswoman in a time when the field was dominated by men. She was a wealthy and successful businesswoman, and could be called a business executive in our world today, but she brought her femininity to bear upon her practice of business by running her business from her home rarely if ever venturing out to do trade herself. Instead she hired capable men to travel and conduct business transactions on her behalf, one of whom being the Holy Prophet (s) himself. Thus on closer amination, we find that there are very few occupational roles in society restricted to gender in Islam and they are restricted for largely symbolic purposes and less, as some would insist, because men are better at some jobs than women and vice versa because of differences in their intellectual or emotional make up. Outside these very few restricted categories, the vast majority of social roles can be held by both men and women, many of which do fall within the spectrum between the two poles of Majesty and Beauty, the Masculine and the Feminine, the Outward and the Inward. Thus whereas engineering and policing might fall nearer the pole of Majesty, social work and nursing might fall nearer the pole of Beauty and journalism and medicine might fall somewhere in the middle. Indeed, there are many occupations, such as medicine, and education that are essential for the collective health of society which demand the equal representation of men and women if we want a healthy Islamic society to thrive.

What is important here is that we don't sacrifice the domestic and the inward for the external and the outward as have been done in Modern Western culture. In today's society domestic life and the occupations associated with it have now been marginalized and are seen as unfulfilling. In its place the outward social life is glamorized and held up as the key to material success. So we have the idea of the "modern woman on the go" and the career woman as the epitome of excitement and self realization.

Many women are now opting out of motherhood in their youth for the fast paced lifestyle and looking to take fertility drugs in their 40's and 50's to try to recapture the motherhood that they were trying to escape earlier on in their lives. This orientation toward outwardness is nothing

more than establishing the superiority of the masculine characteristic of society and the denigration of the feminine the result being that modern western society, despite its claims to gender equality and feminism being one of the most masculinised societies in the history of mankind. One very good index of this masculinisation is the popular concept of feminine beauty. Feminine beauty has been reduced to sexiness which revolves around displaying and accentuating those female physical characteristics that trigger sexual responses in men. Thus women see their beauty from a male perspective and from a purely physical perspective as well. It is interesting to note that in Islam as it was in most traditional cultures that these characteristics were only to be displayed within the intimate context of the home and in marital relationships thus giving the opportunity for more subtle and refined feminine characteristics such as modesty, virtue, nobility, decorum, and sophistication to shine through in the society. In this atmosphere of the tyranny of masculinity, modern woman is the most insecure the world has ever seen. She is always forced to prove that she is more of a man than men themselves in her responses to social pressures, on her job and in the way she thinks. No wonder she is so tired and stressed out and this takes a toll on her psychological and physical health. It is for this reason that many women who convert to Islam do so after witnessing the lives of their Muslim sisters, who, relaxed and confident in their spirituality and their sexuality show them a .peace that had been eluding them all their lives