

Familism!

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Women's liberation versus familism is a subject for debate in traditional countries notably in the Arab world. Its implications refer to the private/public dichotomy, where women's power-concentration is in the private/family and men's in the public/society sphere. Almost always, arguments defending the family are used against calls for women's participation in the public sphere. Women are as if left with a choice, when it is applicable, between the family and themselves as individuals. To fulfill ambitions outside the house means sacrificing the private/family. The general conception is that other members of the family endure this sacrifice, which causes a weakening in the family structure. The truth may be that women and men have not found the most efficient distribution of labor that will relieve women of the blame for the decline of the family. In this article we present some of the arguments that burden women. We also review some of the literature on definitions of family and family decline in an attempt to explore their implications on women.

One claim maintains that the time required for work outside the home must obviously be subtracted from that allocated to domestic duties. Consequently, the family and its members are bound to be the victims of various psychological, social, and household-related 'shortages' or 'neglects'. Are they worth sacrificing for the 'self-fulfillment' of one person, who is invariably the woman?!

Another common formulation of the same argument views the Arab family, in particular, as the primary organizational unit that plays the role of government for its members. It secures and distributes material, social, political and economic resources. Thus, most Arab individuals, female and male, get their social identity, socio-economic status, political affiliations, and gender-specific roles from their families. Since women's familial roles are basic for a 'socially and culturally healthy' family, they do not have much freedom to indulge their own individuality. In most cases, economic need is the conscious motive for women's paid work. Yet, they are not relieved of the double burden of 'employment' and 'homemaking' because the latter remains primary and the former applies only to circumstantial economic needs. "The ideology of women's duty and responsibility ... within the family ... is a counterpart for the material reality" (Brannen and Wilson, 1987: 21) of which men are charged by society. Therefore, women's participation in society's dynamics remains relatively limited compared to that of men.

On another level, many Arab traditionalists use the example of the rising toll of social ills in developed countries which they attribute to what social scientists are coming to call the *decline of the family*. Some use terms like *the breaking down, the disintegration, the disappearance* to describe changes in

the structure of the family. The term *decline* seems more appropriate than any other terminology because it denotes the concept of weakening of the family vis-a-vis other institutions in society.

Terms like *decline* and arguments justifying women vs. familism all, obviously, imply change: women are playing more active roles in society. Changes experienced by the family are not all women-bound as some would want us to believe. Many of them, as mentioned previously, are related to various social, political, economic factors distinct from women's gradual exit into society.

Many of these arguments have encouraged social scientists to make a closer examination of the family, bringing forth a number of definitions of the family and interpretations of its status. There are many suggested combinations of family. However, those which extend beyond the more conventional understandings of family will not be discussed here because of their 'irrelevance' to traditional Arab societies.

The prototype family most commonly used today is that of "a married couple who live together with their children." Another prototypical family used in scholarly analyses states that "the family is a relatively small domestic group consisting of at least one adult and one person dependent on that adult" (Popenoe, 1988: 5) This definition emphasizes (a) domestic

duties, (b) dependence as opposed to an intimate relationship between two adults.

Another definition is "a group of kin who live together and function as a cooperative unit." Here, the variables of (a) kinship and (b) the family as a cooperative unit are added to the formula. Essentially they represent what the family does and consequently affirm that it is a social institution (Popenoe, 1988:6).

Accordingly, the duties of a family or of the person in charge of managing the family are:

- Procreation
- Provision to its members of care, affection and companionship
- Sexual regulation
- Economic cooperation

Combining these definitional pieces, one comes up with a general definition of the prototype family: *A relatively domestic group of kin consisting of at least one adult and one dependent person, the adult being charged by society with carrying out the social functions of procreation and socialization of children, provision of care, affection and companionship, sexual regulation and economic cooperation* (Popenoe, 1988: 6).

The range of definitions presented here can apply to a wide range of countries based on their degree of modernization. Sweden has the world's most egalitarian income distribution and the system whereby the government is the primary provider of the people's individual needs

(Popenoe, 1988: xi). Therefore, it would be safe to assume that the Swedish family is the most modern compared to the predominantly traditional family in the Arab world. Opposition to women's liberation because of its assumed implications on family decline use the Swedish family as one example for their arguments. But even in Sweden the family does not seem to be 'disintegrating' or 'dying out'. *The concept of family decline, therefore, refers to the weakening of domestic groups in society, the groups of kin who live together and function as cooperative units in the performance of their functions* (Popenoe, 1988:8).

According to Popenoe the modern family is weakening in five main areas:

1. As a group it is becoming internally de-institutionalized, meaning that its members are more autonomous, less bound to the group and making it less cohesive.
2. The family is weakening by failing to carry out many of its functions notably that of procreation illustrated by a low birth rate in developed countries.
3. The family is losing power to other institutional groups in society.
4. Family groups are decreasing in size, become unstable with a shorter life span and its members spending smaller proportions of their lives in it.
5. Familism as a cultural value is weakening in favor of such values as self-fulfillment and egalitarianism.

Which brings us back to women, who are most directly implicated in the last characteristic of family decline cited above. As suggested by the arguments presented in the beginning

of this article, it also brings us back to the claim that egalitarianism stands opposite to familism. Is this claim an over-simplification of the situation?

Assuming that familism and egalitarianism are equally important and carry the same weight -- which they do not in the respective cultures of the world -- how can we preserve familism without sacrificing egalitarianism? Where familism is a priority, the individual is accountable to the family which has central authority and is his/her focal group in society. Where egalitarianism and self-fulfillment are a priority, like in Sweden, the government provides for the individual thus promoting individualism.

In Lebanon where women are active in the labor market but where familism remains a predominant cultural value, many feel that one has to be sacrificed for the other. In other words, the family must be sacrificed if a woman chooses a professional life. If women's primary culturally accepted roles are domestic-bound, i.e. wife, mother, housekeeper and member of the extended family, then it must be that changes in these roles and their mode and degree of implementation affects family dynamics. Much of this argument is based on the myth of the mother as the sole caretaker in child-care (Myers and Indriso, 1987:11). Although there are variations by cultural context, research results suggest that women generally show greater and steadier allocation input than men for children's health and emotional needs (Myers and Indriso, 1987:11).

Do these arguments suggest ultimatums for women? For, according to these arguments, women's share of involvement and their contributions to society must concentrate on sustaining

"the domestic groups in society, the groups of kin who live together and function as cooperative units in the performance of their functions."

Using the reverse argument, will reverence to the private/public, female/male dichotomy immune the family from influential factors of change that occur in society? If so, then family structure in traditional societies like the Arab world must remain fixed and non-responsive to structural changes. But again if women are half the population, then shouldn't they be involved in directing these changes, the very same changes to which the family is subjected? In fact, they must participate actively if only by virtue of their assigned responsibilities towards the family.

Structural and value changes do not exhibit a direct cause and effect

relationship. Otherwise familism in the Arab world would have immediately been modified, i.e. weakened, upon the import of modern technology. But it has not. Therefore, there are no definite either/or conditions and choices for women.

With proper allocation of gender resources in the family, women and men can share the responsibilities assigned to the family/private and those assigned to society/public. The idea is to move away from either male or female worlds. Women's entry into the public world must be countered by a similar entry by men into the private/family. At this level, the crucial process of preserving values like familism falls upon the quality of men's presence in the family not on women's absence, which remains significantly marginal in Arab societies anyway.

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