

## **Relevance of Marxist Philosophy to the Family Structure and Working Women Phenomena in Pakistan**

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### **Abstract**

*Marx's theory of communism was an effort to create an egalitarian society. Though with the fall of Soviet Union it was perceived that the Marxism demised as a philosophy but it was fall of an empire but Marxism<sup>1</sup> continued with its profound influence as a political philosophy. The communist parties in many Third World countries are still working in the capacity of a counter force to the existing political and social order. The culture of a society always remained more dominant force in determining the human relationships as compared to the religion therefore the nature of man-wife relations is regulated by the local culture and not by the Islam, the religion of an overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of Pakistan. This relationship is subject to change in the post-development societies, which are struggling to create a balance between the existing order and the challenges posed by the changing realities. This article studies whether the social aspect of Marxist ideology has any relevance to the existing problems of working women in the developing society of Pakistan. It also studies the impact of increasing working women phenomena on the family structure and man-women relations with respect to the women empowerment and any possible solution in the light of Marxist philosophy and Islam.*

### **Introduction**

The family is one of the most important institutions of the society. It provides the basis of growth and continuity to the mankind, in turn to the civilisation. It provides a legitimate way to satisfy the sexual and social instinct of both the male and female. In the traditional structure of a family, the male was supposed to be the head of the family and enjoyed the ultimate authority in decision-making as far as the family matters were concerned by virtue of the economic responsibilities he was bearing. The entire family, especially the women, were supposed to be submissive to their husband, brothers and fathers since they were carrying the purse of the family.

Development is accompanied by the changes in culture, politics, and society as a whole. Some of the drastic changes are experienced even in traditional societies with the emerging trends of women's economic independence in the last few decades. They are now demanding more participation in the decision-making process of the family matters. They expect more respect and more facilitation on the part of their family members being the economic contributors. Being economically empowered, the educated working women are also challenging the traditional wisdom of their men. But the mind-set that the male is all powerful and enjoys the unchallenged position in the family does not allow them (males) to accept the changing realities. They expect that their wives should pursue their career, take the responsibility of child-bearing and rearing and performing all the household functions in parallel with their jobs and at the same time continue to accept the status of a husband as the sole commander, or the reflection of 'God on Earth.' Moreover, their salaries should also be in the hands of the husbands. The result of this exploitation is the resentment and friction that is gradually surfacing with the growing resistance of the males to accepting the status of women as equal partners in the family. With all this, not only the whole family structure is under clouds but the ratio of disintegration of a family is also increasing day by day.

Increasing development activities and modernisation provided opportunities to both male and female to perform their due role. More opportunities in job market stimulated the liberalisation of social bonds and a large number of women entered into work force in the developing countries. But development has its own merits and demerits. One major effect can be seen in the form of changing family norms which are slowly disturbing its status quo.

Such problems were also faced by the developed societies around a century ago, but they sought a solution in liberalising the family environment and more autonomy for both spouses, which later led to weakening of family as an institution if not complete eradication. The developing societies are facing the same dilemma though a strong resistance is being offered due to the strong cultural traditions of these societies. The religion or the quasi-religious forces are also tremulous blocs to the process of change. Since the change in the structure of the societies is a natural phenomena but the preservation of the family structure needs attention of the social scientists with some adjustments in the positive direction to maintain the social fabric of the society and to transfer the fruits of the development to the society. This article studies the phenomena in the developing societies with a focus on case study of Pakistani society.

### **The Family Structure**

The basic unit of the society is an individual who as a social animal cannot live without his or her spouse. Therefore the first right of the individual, after survival, is the right to form a family. Fredrick Engels stated that different civilizations had different family structures at the three main stages of human evolution: savagery and marriage by groups; barbarism and pairing marriage; civilization and monogamy (Engels, 1884).

Pakistan is a traditional society in which the male members enjoy a dominant position in the family structure. A male is the head of the family and enjoys overriding powers over his family members, including males and females. A few decades earlier, the joint family system was common in which all the brothers, their wives and children lived together with their parents, paternal aunts and uncles along with some of their unmarried or otherwise dependent sisters. The nucleus family was rare due to traditional family bonds. But within three decades, these trends have changed. There are several reasons for the declining joint family structure in the developing societies including the inflation rate, dearness, preference to material interests, outstation jobs of the family members etc. (Singh, 2010). Therefore the smaller families with the husband, wife and two to three children are in fashion in an ever growing number with each passing day.

With the nucleus family, many new problems emerged which had earlier been manageable in the joint family. Specially the financial matters and needs were adjusted and managed by the head of the family, so that a son or daughter even with a limited income could enjoy a better living because the resources were accumulated in the hands of the head of the family and were distributed equally. The spirit of sharing and support was also appreciable. The disintegration of the joint family system apparently brought prosperity, but in fact it had multiplied the economic challenge that a couple has to face alone. With the rising consciousness of the standard of living, children's education and other facilities coupled with the scarcity of resources, increasing cost of life and stresses in the social setup etc. further complicated the task of family to survive.

All these problems are related to the economy of the family and to meet these challenges everyone has to work. There are external factors too which led to encourage women in developing societies to enter the work force (Zulfikar, 2010). Therefore the ratio of working women is increasing day by day (Khan, 2007) which caused a drastic change in the social setup even in traditional societies like Pakistan that has displayed emerging trends of women's economic independence in the last few decades. They are expecting more respect and facilitation on the part of their family members for being the economic contributors. They also demand more participation in the decision-making regarding family matters (Khan, 2007). While male dominated society is not accepting the changing patterns within the family. The mindset that the male is all powerful and enjoys an unchallenged position in the family does not allow the husbands of working women to accept the changing realities. The in-laws and specially the female relative of the husbands support their sons and deny their daughters-in-law of their justified rights. The husbands expect their wives to take the responsibility of child-bearing and rearing along with their jobs, while living in the same paradigm where they used to accept the status of a husband as the final authority on all social, economic and family matters. Further, the husbands are also opposing women's economic empowerment by keeping their wives' salary in their own hands. The obvious result is the resentment and friction that is gradually surfacing with the growing resistance of the males to accept the status of women as equal partners. The middle class is the victim of this dilemma where the whole family structure is troubled with the increasing rate of disintegration of family. The situation is further complicated in the lower and downtrodden classes where the education level is generally low and the economic hardships are high. The domestic violence in such families (Press Briefing, 2010) reflects the gravity of the problem on the issues of economic empowerment and command and control in the family matters. There the social fabric is more anti-women both in terms of domestic setup and social mobility. They are strictly under the control of not only their husbands but also their in-laws.

The joint family system, early marriages, more children, low literacy rate and uncertain job opportunities are the causes of social stresses that mount on women and especially the working women of this class. Very often, the women of this class have to bear the burden of the whole family without any position in domestic affairs. Any effort to exercise some activism in family decision-making is met with hard hits both in terms of physical and mental torture. Mostly the abusive and alcoholic husbands maltreat their wives and the latter cannot get rid of the former. The women's own families do not support their daughters to go for separation because the society does not accept it. The public sensitisation is far from the vision in the near future.

The middle and upper middle classes are comparatively in better situation because they have reconciled with the changing realities to some extent. This is true for those passing through this phase in the second generation and where the female literacy is comparatively higher with a good number of working ladies. This change has been accepted though half heartedly and women are facilitated in letter and spirit. If the husbands do not completely empower their wives, at least they give them enough space to survive and help the latter in their households. The economic contributions towards the family by the working women give them a little advantageous position within the family. But still any effort to assert their autonomy in domestic and social matters is considered to be a revolt against the existing norms of the society and a logical outcome of her education and job, ironically speaking. The situation is more tedious in those families which are exposed to this process for the first time.

### **The Legal Status**

Apart from the social practices, the legal position is quite secure for the female. The laws of the land provide them with equal political and economic rights and these are implemented through the higher judiciary (1973 Constitution of Pakistan, chapter 1: Article 25). Separate female police stations have also been established at least in the cities to immediately address the female sufferings (Moin, 2010). The complaints of domestic violence and other offences are highlighted by the media and TV channels. But legal help is the last resort which rarely leads to the reconciliation. Normally, a husband gets so offended by this reporting of the matter to the law enforcing authorities by his wife that the smooth sailing of family becomes impossible and separation becomes the only option. Corruption in the police and the legal system is another nuisance that deters the ladies to go to these institutions for their rescue. Only a social change that could reweave the basic fabric of the society could bring a better hope for a gender egalitarian society.

### **Religion and the status of women**

Women are being exploited in the name of Islam and the supporters of the male dominance quote the verses of Holy Qur'an like 'the husbands are in-charge of (their) women.' They actually quote half of the verse. The full verse is 'Men are in-charge of women, because Allah (God Almighty) has made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women)' (The Holy Qur'an, 4:34). It means that the men have superior position in the family if they spend and take financial responsibility. The Qur'an says 'the believing men and women, they are guardians/leaders of each other' (The Holy Qur'an, 9:71). It means that Islam believes in the equality of man and women as human beings both support each other in the society.

Islam protects the economic rights of women by empowering them with a complete control over their income and property (Azhar, 2009). Their family has no rights over their earnings. They are given their share in the inheritance of the father, mother and husband (Hassan and Rehman, 2010). A Muslim woman is free to exercise her will in the choice of her spouse at the time of her marriage. The Pakistani society is over-dominantly Muslim but the women's rights given by Islam are not observed in social practices including the property rights. Nonetheless the societies are mostly guided by the culture and traditions, and Pakistani society is no exception (Isobel, 2004). Under the cultural traditions of this land, mostly dominated by the Hinduism,<sup>2</sup> the feudal and land-owning families have this usual practice of not marrying their daughters just to preserve their properties.<sup>3</sup> Sisters are also rarely given their share in the family property and those asking for the right of inheritance are declared a *persona non-grata* by their brothers. If some enlightened families give the property right to the female heirs, that is again utilised by her husband and she has no control over her belongings.<sup>4</sup> Under the Islamic law she can share her property and earning with her husband with 'mutual consent,' which is being exploited by the society. Women are pressurised to devote all their properties to their husbands in the name of mutual understanding. Women generally accept this exploitation as their fate since they are brought up in a society which reflects the culture of this land but not the injunctions of Islam. But the case of working ladies is different. They invest their faculties, both physical and mental, in their jobs and in return get a handful of money. It is the reward of their hard work and they should be empowered to have a full control over it (Marx, 1848).

Moreover, their education and job give them confidence to contest for their rights. Therefore, when they are forced to give their husbands all their earnings, they resist. Men persecute their wives in the case of any refusal. The major threat is that of divorce which is considered to be an abuse in this society. Since it is not an easy decision for a woman to opt for a divorce therefore this persecution induces her to surrender her economic rights.

### **Marxist Feminism and its Relevance**

Karl Marx is a distinguished social thinker with a profound influence on the political thought of his own time and even today. His major areas of interests were politics, economy and class struggle in the society. The Marxist ideology believes that the structure of a society greatly influences an individual.<sup>5</sup> The mode of production that exists in a society shapes the people's desires, opportunities, and interests. The Marxist feminists see the contemporary gender inequality as the ultimate outcome of the capitalist mode of production. To him the gender oppression is class oppression and the relationship between man and woman is similar to the relations between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.<sup>6</sup> Marx declared a husband as the bourgeoisie in the family whereas the wife stands as the proletariat. He further states that the bourgeoisie uses the wives as 'a mere instrument of production (Marx and Engels, 1848).' The proponents of Marxist feminism take domestic labour as a wage worker. Women's subordination is seen as a form of class oppression,<sup>7</sup> which is maintained (like racism) because it serves the interests of the capitalists and the ruling class. The private property gives rise to economic inequality which leads to dependence and political confusion (The Radical Women Manifesto 2001, 2-26). They believe the 'elimination of the capitalist profit-driven economy would remove the motivation for sexism, racism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression.'<sup>8</sup> In the social sphere it generates unhealthy relations between men and women. Therefore the roots of women's oppression in the current social system lie in capitalism (Gimenez, 2005).

Fredrick Engels<sup>9</sup> concludes that a woman's subordination was not an outcome of her biological disposition but it was due to social relations. He further says that the institution of a family as it exists consists of a complex system in which 'men command women's services' (Engels, 1884). Marxism deals with the question of women's emancipation in relevance to the forces in the society which determine the relations between a man and a woman and the source of exploitation in the society. He wrote an article in support of the 1500 women workers on strike in 1853-54 in Preston, England against the adverse working conditions for labour. In another article he directly dealt with husband-wife relations. It was published when Lady Bulwer Lytton, a novelist, tried to publish her political views poles apart 'from those of her well-known husband' and was sent to the 'insane asylum' (Marxism and Feminism, 2000). It depicts that Marx was in favour of the individuality of thoughts and actions of the wives, independent of their families and husbands. His support for the Lady speaks for the existence of a woman as a human being and her right to exercise her faculties free from social pressures in a society.

Marx believed that the women's oppression started from primitive communism, in a pre-capitalist period. On the basis of the values and the equation of man-woman relations in pre-capitalist and non-European societies, he observes the possibility of a new set of relationships on the basis of the equality of the sexes as an outcome of a revolution. Marx deals with matters like women requiring permission from their husbands to dispose off their own property and declares that women should be independent to exercise control over her property. He visualised to end this discrimination through a complete overhauling of the society through revolution (Ethnological Notebooks).

For Marxists 'the women, as much as men, are a set of social relations, historically adapted and changes as do the function of the society in the course of development process. Woman is a social product; her transformation demands the transformation of society' (Quispe, 1996). Dunayeskaya appreciated the Marxist thought as a breakthrough in his humanist essays introducing the concept of man-woman relationship and declaring that if we want to achieve a just society, the old one has to be completely uprooted. In her view, Marx's emphasis was on 'the collective labour of men and women, under different historic conditions, "creates a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family" and of the relation between the sexes.' He further highlighted the situations 'where both sexes work collectively could "become a source of humane development"' (Dunayeskaya 1996, 197-98). Fromm commented that the Marx placed a human being at the centre of his thought. He contends that in a given society and class, people start their lives and even then they can liberate themselves by knowing their capabilities (Fromm 1991, 82, 37). It can be translated that in Marx's understanding, the males and females both living in a particular society can survive and liberate themselves due to their capabilities and their cooperation is inevitable to human development in a given society.

**Conclusion**

The critic says that Marxist feminism did not develop with Marx but 'in dialogue with Marx.' There is an accepted perception about Marx that his works deals with the political economy, the state, ideology, social class and other aspects of capitalist societies,' and it contributes little to the women question (Gimenez, 2005). However, Marx's ideology helps to identify the roots of inequality between men and women at the very foundation of the capitalistic society. Female discrimination is visible in the economic, social and political structures of the society. Marx studies it with reference to women labour and economic rights, since the roots of the exploitation lie in the denial of economic rights to women which reduce it to being merely a subject in the family. Like the class structure and the state, he wanted to eradicate the traditional family set up at the later stages of his communist revolution because he thought that it is a mode of exploitation of the wife at the hands of her husband, as happens in a proletariat-bourgeoisie relationship. He presents the concept of a Revolution in permanence and considers the women to be a force and the reason during and before the revolution. Raya Dunayeskaya interprets Marx's thought as a proponent of women's rights, especially the working women's rights, because 'the great social changes' are not possible without 'the feminine ferment' (Dunayeskaya, 1991). However if we implement the Marxist analysis and go for the eradication of the family structure we would go back to the age before civilisation. Moreover it is every difficult to eradicate the centuries old institution of family from a society which is so strong in traditions that religion could merely change it nominally.

If we see through the lens of Marxist thought, societies have to change with the course of evolution and this change is inevitable. Education and economic independence certainly brought enlightenment and confidence in the factions previously denied of their due rights in the society. Since women were the deprived factions they could not be deprived forever. Their status has to be recognised by their male guardians sooner or later. This cultural change is slow but indispensable. Still there is a wide acceptance of Marxism as an ideology preaching an egalitarian society among the revolutionist and activists in all fields of life in the developing societies. On the other hand, the enlightened Muslims also believe in the dignity of mankind and equality with any discrimination on the basis of cast, creed, race and economic status. They also believe in the equal status of man and woman and their independence in their own spheres. Marxist reformers in collaboration with the moderate Muslims, can find the solution to women's empowerment in a given developing society within the cultural frame work, just short of the eradication of the family structure by accepting Marx's 'new humanism' that both sexes can work together to bring development in the society on the basis of their respective potentialities.

**NOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> Marx is a social thinker who presented an economic and political solution to end discrimination in the class ridden societies.

<sup>2</sup>It was the oldest religion of this land, India, which gave the women a sub-ordinate role to the men, so much so that the widows had no right to live after the death of their husbands and they were forced to burn themselves in the “Chita” (Burning body of a dead man) of their deceased husbands. They were not given any property right.

<sup>3</sup>The marriages with the ‘Qur’an’ are common in the villages of Pakistan in Landed aristocracy just to avoid giving a woman her share in the family inheritance. It means that she would be confined to the four walls of her house and will lead a life of Nun.

<sup>4</sup>That becomes another reason for not giving women their share in property.

<sup>5</sup>To Marx it implies the class structure in all modern societies which influences the social structure.

<sup>6</sup>Frederick Engels defined that the Bourgeoisie means the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labour. The proletariat means the class of modern wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live.

<sup>7</sup>In his work the Communist Manifesto, he presents that although society was mainly built upon capitalism, communism would soon replace it. This change would come through the proletariat (the workers). But it would happen when they would realize to change their society to a classless society since they have been victims of capitalism. Frederick Engels and Karl Marx (1848) *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, <http://www.marxist.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm>.

<sup>8</sup>In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, both Clara Zetkin and Eleanor Marx were against the demonization of men and supported a proletarian revolution that would overcome as many male–female inequalities as possible (Stokes 2000). As their movement already had the most radical demands in women’s equality, most Marxist leaders, including Clara Zetkin (1895) and Alexandra Kollontai (1909), counter-posed Marxism to feminism, rather than trying to combine them.

<sup>9</sup>He laid the foundation of Marxist feminism in his work, *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, an analysis of gender oppression in society. He was a close collaborator of Marx in development of theory and a new political-economic system based on dialectical materialism. Frederick Engels wrote more on women issues than Marx himself. ‘Marx and Engels on “Woman”,’ <http://www.newfoundations.com/WOMEN/Marx.html>, retrieved on 11/4/2010.

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