

Beijing+25: Has the Mask of Gender Equality Fallen?

TALK 5: Progress or Oppression from the Narrative: ‘Women’s Empowerment through Employment’?

INDONESIA

“We are angry. 25 years since Beijing, we are far from reaching gender equality. Inequalities of wealth, power and resources are greater than ever before.”

This decisive statement was expressed by young women and feminists from across the Asia Pacific who gathered at the youth civil society and feminist forum in Bangkok on 22-26 November 2019, organized by the UN Special Agency for Social Economy in the Asia Pacific or UNESCAP. The forum was organized by UNESCAP to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. In the economic field of the BPfA, there are several strategic objectives which aim to promote self-reliance and economic rights of women, including equal access to employment, feasibility of work environment, as well as to promote harmonization of the responsibilities between work and family life for women and men. In fact, **‘Women’s Empowerment through Employment’** is a major running theme through much of the BPfA, and is addressed in various ‘areas of concern’.

It is argued that increasing women’s employment and equalizing their presence in the workplace with men will help lift women and nations out of poverty, facilitate economic growth, enable women to have full participation in society and greater access to opportunities, and contribute heavily to sustainable development in lands and the progress of states. Article 16 of the Beijing Declaration for example reads: *“Eradication of poverty based on sustained economic growth, social development, environmental protection and social justice requires the involvement of women in economic and social development, equal opportunities and the full and equal participation of women and men as agents and beneficiaries of people-centred sustainable development.”* Consequently, in order to achieve these strategic objectives, the BPfA calls for, among other things, a change to the division of labour, away from the man being the breadwinner for the family and the woman the homemaker and primary caretaker of the children, and towards greater sharing of responsibilities of the genders within the family unit. However, the question is: Is it true that after twenty-five years of the BPfA that women internationally have really been empowered and achieved prosperity through its provisions and through greater employment?

Firstly, through this narrative of empowerment through employment, the successful woman became defined as the one who earned her own income and pursued a career rather than the one who made her primary vocation a home-maker and mother in order to successfully raise her children. Hence, the worth of women came to be valued upon paid work, which inevitably devalued their unique and vital status as the mothers of humanity. Looking after the home and childrearing were campaigned against as unimportant, a waste of women’s talents and placing women in a subordinate position to men. The consequence was the creation of societies where women no longer have the option to work but are expected to because of social or economic pressures, even if they are single mothers with sole responsibility for the care of their children, causing immense stresses upon them and their home-life. In 2013, the UK *Guardian* published an article under the title, *“The rise of ‘breadwinner moms’ is less a win for equality than it looks”* in which it cited statistics from a report by the PEW Research Centre that in 40% of all US households with children, mothers are the sole or primary breadwinners. The article described how the majority of the 40% - two thirds – were single mothers, many of whom were struggling with the task of juggling home and childcare responsibilities. It stated, *“For single moms, in particular, the reality of primary*

breadwinner status feels like less of a feminist victory than simply being overworked, under-supported and broadly stigmatized.”

Furthermore, the idea that employment would bring women a higher status, a better quality of life and economic security was an illusion, for in most countries, large numbers of women entered low paid, poor quality, and often dangerous and exploitative jobs, often working for long hours with few if any employment rights, and little job security – for example in sweat shops, poorly maintained factories and as migrant workers who have to travel thousands of miles away from their children and families to earn a basic wage. According to records from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), around 48 percent of total migrants are women. In addition, an analysis by the International Labour Organisation of 142 countries, published in their 2016 ‘Women at Work Trends’ report, showed that women remain overrepresented as “Clerical, service and sales workers” and in “Elementary occupations” – the lowest paid occupations. Undoubtedly, some women have succeeded in improving their economic standing through employment. However, this is a small proportion compared to the masses of employed women whose financial woes continue to be dire. For example, in the UK, 62% of those earning less than the real living wage are women, and nearly one third of all working women in the UK do not earn a wage they can live on (Living Wage Foundation, 2017). Furthermore, government austerity cuts have caused significant numbers of female teachers, nurses, police officers and other low-paid female workers to rely on foodbanks to feed their families. Additionally, although the number of employed single parents in the country, most of whom are women, is at a record high, the risk of child poverty among these families has risen to 1/3 - the highest in 20 years according to 2018 figures from the Gingerbread Charity. Hence, the gender equality promises for which women sacrificed motherhood and valuable time with their children to enter employment, in the hope that this would elevate their status, did not even deliver in the economic sphere of their lives. Large numbers of women were not more well-off; rather, they were working simply to pay for others to look after and raise their children.

Moreover, a quarter of a century after the Beijing Declaration and its slogan of ‘employment for empowerment’, women continue to be subjected to modern day economic slavery at epidemic levels. In 2017, the UK Guardian reported that hundreds of workers in sweatshop factories of world-renowned sports brands such as Nike, Puma, Asics and VF Corporation were hospitalized due to repeated fainting from exhaustion. The incidents were part of a pattern of fainting that has dogged the 600,000-strong mostly female garment workforce for years. The women who collapsed worked 10-hour days, six days a week and reported feeling exhausted and hungry. Excessive heat was also an issue in three factories, with temperatures of 37°C. Similar horrific exploitative environments in which women work are mirrored in garment and other factories in Bangladesh, Pakistan, China and other states across the world.

In Africa, women are exploited at work in the agricultural sector which is predominantly comprised of small-scale farming, with more than 50% of the agricultural activity performed by women, producing about 60-70% of the food in the Sub-Saharan Africa region. Women have been greatly burdened in agricultural production, which is back-breaking, exhaustive work, involving long-hours, and often performed under the hot sun.

Gender Equality policies and labour rights laws within countries have failed dismally to protect women from such industrial-scale levels of exploitation. This is because they operate within the framework of capitalist systems which have always viewed women as tools of production to increase the profits of businesses or revenue of states, for capitalism sanctifies wealth creation over all other values in life, including the wellbeing of women. Under this materialistic system, the peak role of women is translated solely in the language of economics and material gain. Hence, it used feminist and gender equality narratives to push

women into the workforce to achieve its financial goals, with little economic benefits for women. Furthermore, Capitalism's materialistic philosophy of life nurtures mindsets within many employers and businesses who calculate the 'cost' and 'profit' in their dealings with employees, superseding all other values – whether humanitarian, moral or spiritual - creating an environment that is ripe for the exploitation of women. All this is hardly the paradise of empowerment promised to women through employment! Rather, it is the epitome of disempowerment! Disempowering women in their role as mothers! Disempowering women by burdening them with the unbearable strains of juggling home-life and work responsibilities! And disempowering women by chaining and enslaving them to the economic market!

This spectacular failure of the Beijing Declaration and dozens of other international conventions in meeting women's economic rights is due to (1) the adoption of the secular idea of gender equality which has a tunnel vision and illusionary approach to solving women's problems, diverting attention from their true causes and solutions and placing the blame misleadingly on inequality between men and women, and (2) being blinded to the scale of the hegemony and toxicity of the system and ideology of Capitalism which is the root source of and carries primary responsibility for the financial, environmental and humanitarian disasters that have paralyzed the Muslim countries and crippled their economies as well as those of other lands. It is this Capitalist system that has generated mass poverty and deprivation of basic rights of millions of women, as well as leading them to the abyss of exploitation and human trafficking networks due to its defining characteristic of placing 'profit over people'.

These oppressed women are living proof of the capitalist, feminist lie of 'women's empowerment through employment', and victims of the exploitative and tyrannical labor policies of capitalism, as well as the absence of the state's role in protecting their rights as workers and citizens.

Islam is diametrically different from the Capitalist ideology.

Firstly, Islam, as an ideology, does not place the pursuit of material gain over the seeking of other important values within society, such as the spiritual, humanitarian and moral values. Rather, it organises the society in a way where all of these values are achieved and exist in a harmonious manner which is beneficial for human beings—male and female alike. Therefore, it would never put the material value above morality, or place money above the dignity of human beings, regardless of the scale of economic gain. It also strongly rejects the values of materialism and hedonism that come from the viewpoint of Capitalism and seeks to break the materialistic personality whose focus is only on material matters regardless of the consequences upon others. This minimizes exploitative and unjust behaviour towards others. Islam also rejects the capitalist philosophy of placing financial interests over the integrity of the family unit, reflected in the pressures placed on women to enter employment that has devalued motherhood, strained marriages, neglected the rights of children and placed untold burden upon women to become breadwinners of their families – all in the name of making them engine drivers of the economy. In contrast to capitalism, Islam does not view women as tools of production or cheap labour, but rather values them as a human beings who should have a high status in society, where they are protected from exploitation in any form, where their honor and wellbeing are preserved always, and where they are supported to fulfil their vital roles as mothers.

Secondly, in Islam, women are provided the privilege of always being financially maintained by their husband, or other male relatives.

Allah (swt) also says, **﴿وَعَلَى الْمَوْلُودِ لَهُ رِزْقُهُنَّ وَكِسْوَتُهُنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ لَا تُكَلَّفُ نَفْسٌ إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا لَا تُضَارَّ وَالِدَةٌ وَلَا تُولَدُ لَهُ مَوْلُودٌ لَهُ مَوْلُودٌ لَهُ مَوْلُودٌ لَهُ وَعَلَى الْوَارِثِ مِثْلُ ذَلِكَ﴾** "...the father of the child shall bear the cost of the

mother's food and clothing on a reasonable basis. No person shall have a burden laid on him greater than he can bear. No mother shall be treated unfairly on account of her child, nor father on account of his child. And on the (father's) heir is incumbent the like of that (which was incumbent on the father)." [Al-Baqarah: 233]

In Islam, women are allowed to seek employment and pursue a career, for the Prophet (saw) said: «**قَدْ أُذِنَ لَكُنَّ أَنْ تَخْرُجْنَ لِحَوَائِجِكُنَّ**» **“O women! You have been allowed by Allah (swt) to go out for your needs.”** [Bukhari]. However, they should not be coerced or forced, either through social or economic pressures to enter employment to provide for themselves and their families such that they compromise their vital duty of caring for nurturing and raising their children to become exemplary Islamic personalities and citizens of the state.

In addition, Islam establishes a belief in Rizq (set provision from Allah (swt)) so that fear of poverty or economic hardship does not undermine the division of gender roles in the family through the idea that both the husband and wife should be breadwinners to ensure financial security and prosperity rather than understanding that the man is responsible for providing for his family. Allah (swt) says: «**أَوَلَمْ يَعْظُمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَبْسُطُ الرِّزْقَ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَقْدِرُ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ**» **“Do they not know that Allah extends provision for which He wills and restricts [it]? Indeed in that are signs for a people who believe.”** [Az-Zumar: 52]

Thirdly, Islam rejects feminism which calls for equal and shared roles and responsibilities of men and women in private and public life. Instead, it defines a set of family laws that organize the division of roles between the husband and wife in a manner which is complementary rather than competitive, and ensures the needs and rights of all family members are fulfilled, including the children. So as mentioned, with regards to organising family life, Islam has prescribed the man the role of guardian and provider of the family, while the woman is the homemaker and primary caretaker of the children. Ibn Umar narrated that the Messenger (saw) said: «**كُلُّكُمْ رَاعٍ وَكُلُّكُمْ مَسْئُولٌ عَنْ رَعِيَّتِهِ، الْإِمَامُ رَاعٍ وَمَسْئُولٌ عَنْ رَعِيَّتِهِ، وَالرَّجُلُ رَاعٍ فِي أَهْلِهِ**» **“All of you are guardians and are responsible for your subjects. The ruler is a guardian of his subjects, the man is a guardian of his family, the woman is a guardian and is responsible for her husband's house and his offspring; and so all of you are guardians and are responsible for your subjects.”** [Bukhari and Muslim]. Article 120 of Hizb ut Tahrir's Draft Constitution for the Khilafah states: *“The responsibility of the husband over his wife (qiwaamah) is one of taking care, and not ruling. She is obligated to obey her husband and he is obligated to meet the costs of her livelihood according to a fair standard of living (ma'roof).”* Additionally, the woman should not be pressured into employment, minimizing the strain on marriages and family life that often results from both spouses working long working hours or strenuous demanding jobs. All this helps to achieve tranquillity in marriage and harmony in the family unit.

And finally, the role of the state is vital in Islam in taking care of the needs of the people. Its main task is to serve and take care of the needs of every citizen, protect the vulnerable, and prevent any injustice. This fundamental principle ensures that labor problems will be minimal under the Khilafah and resolved swiftly through the application of the Shariah rules upon any employment problem if they do arise. Under this system, the migrant labor problem that victimizes millions of women will not be tolerated and the state will seek to eradicate it. The Prophet (saw) said, «**فَالْإِمَامُ الَّذِي عَلَى النَّاسِ رَاعٍ وَهُوَ مَسْئُولٌ عَنْ رَعِيَّتِهِ**» **“An Imam is a shepherd (ra'in) and he is responsible for those in his care.”** [Bukhari]

Regarding employment, Islam has a distinctive approach to the issue, different to any other ideology in the world. Some of Islam's most important principles of labor policies that addresses the problem of exploitation of workers include:

1. Protection for women and the vulnerable

2. The unique equal relationship between employers and workers
3. The work to be performed should be strictly halal
4. No workers stratification
5. Determination of fair wages

Islamic employment or labor policies is reflected in the composition of the Islamic society that has never split into two classes, the working class and business class, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, the patron with the client, etc. No, Islam does not recognize this at all. It builds a unique equal relationship between the worker and the employer, which is based upon the sense of responsibility to fulfill the rights and obligations of each other as Islam ordered. According to the Islamic view, partnership between the employer and employee is a relationship that should be mutually beneficial. It is not allowed for a party to wrong or to be wronged by the other party. Imam Bukhari narrated from Abu Hurairah (ra), the Prophet (saw) said, Allah (swt) said: «ثَلَاثَةٌ أَنَا خَصْمُهُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ رَجُلٌ أَعْطَى بِي ثُمَّ عَدَرَ وَرَجُلٌ بَاعَ حُرًّا فَأَكَلَ ثَمَنَهُ وَرَجُلٌ اسْتَأْجَرَ أَجِيرًا فَاسْتَوْفَى مِنْهُ وَلَمْ يُعْطِ أَجْرَهُ» **Allah said: There are three persons whom I will oppose on the Day of Resurrection: a man who gives his word by Me but proves treacherous; a man who sells a free person and consumes the price; and a man who employs a worker and receives a completed job but he does not pay him his wages.** [Bukhari] In order to maintain the good partnership and ensure that all parties involved are mutually benefited, Islam organizes the employer-employee relationship in a clear and detailed way with the laws related to ijarat al-ajir (the employment contract). In fact, Islam states that unclear agreement points within an ijarat transaction qualifies it as a fasid (broken) agreement. With clear and detailed provisions in the ijarat al-ajir transaction, each party understands their rights and obligations, and is a protection against tyrannical employers forcing workers to work outside their defined hours. Furthermore, the provisions of Islam subject the functioning of business life upon the principle of halal and haram, without exploitation or taking advantage of others' suffering.

The Khilafah (Caliphate) is responsible for preventing injustice in all its forms. Specifically in the area of employment, Islam enforces strict laws upon anyone who enacts injustice, whether employers or employees. Creating a safe and non-exploitative work environment for workers is also the responsibility of the state. The Shariah laws ensure that there should be no injustice of one party against another and the state is obliged to remove any oppressive act, whether it is committed by employers against workers or vice versa. Letting injustice happen is a sin and immoral, and is forbidden by Allah (swt). If the state allows injustice to take place, then it is an obligation upon all Muslims to account the ruler in order to rectify the situation and get rid of the injustice. If people are not able to correct their ruler, the matter is transferred to the Mukhamat Al-Madhalim (the court of unjust acts) that will force the ruler to remove the corruption, injustice, or oppression from the state.

Hence, Islam and the Khilafah provide a comprehensive means to protect women from exploitation and poverty, enabling them to seek safe and dignified employment from their own volition, facilitating happy and fulfilled marriages and family lives and raising the status of their unique and vital role as mothers. Allah (swt) says, «فَإِمَّا يَأْتِيَنَّكُمْ مِنِّي هُدًى فَمَنِ اتَّبَعَ هُدَايَ فَلَا يَضِلُّ» ***Whoever follows My Guidance shall neither go astray, nor fall into distress and misery. But whoever turns away from My Reminder, verily, for him is a life of hardship, and We shall raise him up blind on the Day of Resurrection.*** [TMQ Ta-Ha: 123-124].