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Reconstructing the Traditional Roles of Contemporary Muslim Mothers in Kenya

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There is a constant struggle for women who aspire to be good Muslim mothers at the same time have a positive impact on their society as professionals. These women do acknowledge and understand their unique position in the upbringing of children and prioritise motherhood responsibility over their other ambitions in life. There are those who prioritise their education and career over motherhood and others believe that Muslim women are not ideally supposed to be working outside the house. The Muslim society is experiencing all types of impurities ranging from drug addiction, corruption, homosexuality, lesbianism, alcoholism, homicides, and mass poverty to destitution. Could this be as a result of Muslim women going out to work and delegating their responsibility at home? Or how can they make the best out of their position at home as mothers and outside as professionals to help change society? In what ways can they balance and get out of their stereotypical roles and contribute positively to the wellbeing of the whole society? This article will discuss motherhood institutions from the daily experiences of mothers; homestay, working, older, and the modern generation. It will also try to find out whether they can balance being a mother and a career person and what impact this will have on Muslim society.

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INTRODUCTION

There is an emerging global challenge the modern Muslim mothers who have to juggle between being a mother and a professional person. These mothers usually struggle on a daily basis to balance their professional responsibility and their role as mothers. Traditionally, Muslim mothers are supposed to be at home, nurturing and taking care of the family members in their daily chores. The mother is expected to fulfil all the needs of the young ones, do the cleaning, the cooking, and the laundry, simply because they are not working at the moment and are at home most of the time. The fathers are the breadwinners in the family and they therefore provide for the basic necessities; hence the mothers are left with no option but to take up the household responsibility of caregiving and homemaking (Cheruvallil, 2016).

Muslim mothers have always known their key role in upbringing children and they have a great sense of responsibility in producing and influencing great men and inculcating beautiful values in their hearts and minds. The mothers learn the psychology of their children and appreciate the differences in their attitudes and inclinations. She tries to venture into their innocent world and implant noble seeds of sound character and good values by being their role models. Children are good imitators and they need to be given something good to imitate, especially from the mother since she spends most of the time with them. Mothers are naturally very close to their children; they are open with them and share their thoughts and experience. In that way, the mother is in a better position to correct their feeling and thoughts depending on the age and the mental level of the children. The mother's love, affection, and compassion for her children earn her sincere obedience from the heart that is based on love, respect, and trust; hence they will be able to listen to her regular words of guidance and correction. This good gesture from the mother usually fills their

heart with confidence and security (Al-Hashimi, 1996).

Due to one reason or the other, today's Muslim mothers find themselves working and they have to leave their responsibility to some helpers either by employing house help or leaving them with relatives. The mother is away from home for quite a long time during the day and she is not physically present to know the happenings at home. There are video calls that the mothers can make, but it is not enough and this cannot compensate for her absence.

Although earlier scholars on motherhood such as Maududi and Thanvi strongly believe that there is no or very little space for Muslim women to be involved in the public domain and that their only success depends on their ability to bring forth an offspring and take the responsibility of rearing them (Glenn, 1994). Al-Hashimi (1996) talks of Muslim women taking up jobs on certain occasions; when there is a lack of a relative or spouse to provide for her honourably or the community needs her input in a specific area. He advises that the work should not go against her feminine nature as a woman and one that will not compromise her honour or religion. As much as it fits to say that the ideal place of operation for a Muslim woman is at home, their responsibility does not end in the household, especially in this fast-growing world. Mothers are contributing immensely to the eradication of corruption and restoration of morale. Muslim mothers have the responsibility to offer their services for the restoration of Islamic values in light of the teachings in the Quran and the sayings of the prophet (Farhat, 2015). Women have attained a rich legacy of excellence in their roles as leaders, professionals, activists, and caregivers; therefore, they can expand their intellect and capabilities for the betterment of society. Allah has clearly mentioned in the Quran that both men and women are responsible for avoiding vices and enjoining virtues and men cannot do it alone.

The biggest challenge is to understand how the mothers are handling the responsibility of being a mother and working outside the home. Most mothers feel overwhelmed and are really trying their level best to balance the two responsibilities (Farhat 2015). The world is witnessing all sorts of social and moral decadence, from sexual harassment, rape, school dropouts, drug addiction, homosexuality, lesbianism, alcoholism, family breakups, and suicides. Can the source of these vices be attributed to the negligence of the women in their roles as mothers?

The key assumption in this study is that Muslim women are absent in the upbringing of their children during their crucial time of development when they need proper guidance and care. This results in a problematic upbringing of children who end up being a burden to society. Hence the central question being addressed by this study is to understand how mothers balance the two responsibilities amicably and if not, so well what are the repercussions of it. The article uses the religious text and the real lives of working mothers in explaining motherhood and their challenges as professional people.

This article has four categories. The first category is about the introduction of the study. The second category concerns the review of literature on motherhood in Islam, Muslim women, working Muslim mothers and the role of Muslim mothers in the upbringing of children. The third category provides the findings of the research that has been organised thematically using the analysis of the study objectives, the result of the Focus Group Discussions and the interviews. Finally, the fourth category presents the general conclusion of the research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditionally Muslim mothers have been given the critical role of rearing children and the responsibility starts right after conception. Once the mother realises that she is no longer alone and that she is carrying a baby in her, everything in her life changes from emotional, psychological, and physical and this leads to the nourishment of the child within her body. Throughout the pregnancy, a Muslim mother is supposed to take care of her mind,

soul, and body for her sake and the child is growing inside her by spiritual nourishment by praying and praising Allah for His countless bounties upon her and constantly praying for the unborn child. A Muslim mother is required to take care of her diet by developing eating healthy eating habits and regular exercise and they should strive to stay calm and cheerful, not to invite any form of emotional discomfort and stress. The conditions affecting the mother will in turn have an impact on the unborn child and even during breastfeeding the mother's production of milk is determined by her emotional and psychological state. At the end of it all, when the journey of the nine months is over, a healthy, intelligent, understanding, pious and religious child is born (Abdul Majid, 2004).

The best gift a mother can give to the child after birth is breast milk which contains all the necessary nutrition that the baby needs and cannot be replaced by any form of man-made formula. Allah has ordered for the breastfeeding of infants to be continued for a period of not less than two years (Q 2:233). Breastfeeding is also helpful to the mother in several ways: it acts as a form of family planning, although not 100% safe, but mothers who are exclusively breastfeeding their babies, especially between the 6th and 12th month after birth, do not conceive, it helps them shade the excess baby fat on their bodies and it can also help in the contraction of the womb (Al-Hashimi, 1996).

The real responsibility of the Muslim mother begins after the birth of the child till the end of her life, of which she has to be present in one way or the other. From a tender age, mothers are rightly positioned to mould their character and shape them to the best of their ability (Rahman, 2016). Muslim mothers have been given the responsibility to give spiritual and moral guidance by being role models and giving good examples to their children to emulate. Mothers are the first teachers, and the critical training is done during the first five years, whereby the mother has to develop and plant the first seed of knowledge at home with her loving and caring nature.

Motherhood and Mothering in the Quran and the Sunnah

The positions of Muslim mothers are acknowledged and appreciated and their rights are valued and

dignified both in the Quran and the Sunnah of the prophet.

The Quran, which is a divine revelation of Allah and Allah's own words, is somewhat not explicit on the dos and don'ts of motherhood. Allah says in the Quran that Muslims have to respect parents and more so the mother who has given birth and breastfed them for a maximum of two years and HE says that Muslims must be grateful to HIM and to their parents (Q 31:14). In another narration, Allah tells the Muslims that they have to do good for their parents and remember the trouble that the mother has gone through in bringing them forth, bearing, and weaning for two and a half years (Q 46:15).

The mothers that are mentioned by name in the Quran are Maryam, the mother of Issa, who when she was in labour wished that she was dead. The loneliness and too much worry were putting her down, but Allah never abandoned her. He was there for her and provided her with fresh dates and water. After the birth she was instructed to fast for three days while abstaining from talking and later, Issa as an infant does the talking to tell the people who were accusing her that he was a miracle baby (Q 19:23-26).

Prophet Musa's mother is also mentioned in the Quran when she was instructed by Allah to put her baby in the river and was assured that the baby would be brought back to her. Allah knows the love of a mother for her child and knows how it feels to give away one's child. When the baby was in the custody of Firawn's wife, he refused to suck the milk of all the foster mothers that were presented to him and when his sister suggested her mother, Allah's promise was fulfilled and baby Musa was once again in the arms of his beloved mother (Q 20:37-40; Q 28:7-13). Other mothers who are identified by their roles in Islamic history include the mother of Maryam, the foster mother of Musa and also the wives of the prophet. Although the wives of the prophet were not all mothers, they were regarded as the mothers of the believers because of their steadfastness and pious lives they were leading.

The Sunnah, which is regarded as the practice of the prophet recorded in the books of Hadiths, acknowledges the position of mothers and the prophet has enjoined goodness to them before the

father. When the prophet was asked by one of his companions about who he should be good too, the prophet advised him to consider the mother first, second, and third positions and the father came in the fourth position (Sahih Al Bukhari Book 78 Hadith 2). In another narration, a man came to the prophet for advice that he wanted to go for jihad, and the prophet asked him whether his mother was alive; when the man answered yes, he was told to stay behind and take care of her as the paradise is beneath her feet. Meaning he is more likely to earn the reward of entering paradise when he takes care of his mother than when he goes for jihad (Sunan an Nisa'i Book 25 Hadith 20). It is obligatory for Muslim women to go for jihad, but the prophet explained that they were fighters in their own way. A woman is a fighter in Allah's way throughout her pregnancy, labour, and breastfeeding and if she dies at the end of this journey, her position is that of the martyr. Raising a pious child is the greatest good deed and the reward continues even after death (Cheruvallil, 2016). The responsibility of the Muslim mother is also explained in the following Hadith of the prophet that says, "each one of you is a shepherd and each of you is responsible for his flock ... a woman is a shepherd in the house of her husband and is responsible for her flock (Sahih Al-Bukhari 7138, Sahih Muslim 1829).

Although the Quran is not explicit about what mothers should or not do, their contribution to the wellbeing of society is undisputed (Cheruvallil, 2016). The success of the Muslim woman does not depend on her ability to bring forth offspring, but it depends on her personality as a good Muslim person who can contribute to the moral and spiritual healthy growth of the society. The mother's role in Islam is highly regarded and is called the "school of Nation". 'Umm', which is an Arabic word-meaning mother, is a root word of Ummah which means the Muslim community. Allah has bestowed upon the Muslim mother the responsibility of caregiving, guiding, nurturing, safeguarding, and teaching the next generation of the Muslim Ummah (Rahman, 2015). Thus, the prophet said in his Hadith, "woman is the caretaker of all the members of her husband's family and his children. And for this she will be questioned on the Day of Judgment" (Sahih Al-Bukhari 7138, Sahih Muslim 1829).

Balancing Act: Motherhood and Career

The important contributions and the exclusive blessings of mothers that Allah has given are coupled with the big challenges and the struggles they handle every day of their lives. The institution of motherhood for Muslim women becomes one of great learning, negotiating, and understanding from their own experience of motherhood from being daughters of their mothers to mothers themselves (Cheruvallil, 2016). Muslim women all over the world are trying to draw a balance between mothering and other aspirations that they may have such as education or career.

Muslim women are trying to walk away from the patriarchal reading of the motherhood institution, which is limiting to more potential energy where they can create a balance of the two. There is more to a woman than just being a mother and mothering is changing from the previous generations that were limited to domestic lives to women who can positively change society from various angles (Schleifer, 1994). The mothers and grandmothers of the previous generations were not educated in Islamic texts, and the understanding of motherhood was mostly influenced by their cultural systems. They, therefore, lived domestic lives and mainly focused on the upbringing of the children with no major influence outside the home. Motherhood is like a career and whoever is taking it must excel in it. The experience of being a mother is one of life's precious, joyful, and rewarding moments that need to be cherished as it will not last for long (Rahman, 2016). Although the feeling is extremely satisfying, it comes with lots of stress at times, as taking care of the young ones is physically tiring and caring for the older children causes a lot of worry due to their outside exposure. The challenge that modern mothers have to face include but are not limited to the daily stress of interrupted sleep, kids refusing to eat, untidy rooms, siblings fighting, unruly teenagers, and undone homework. A more complex situation arises from the outside environment where children spend most of their time and they include unhealthy relationships, peer pressure, early dating, social media influence, drug and substance abuse, alcoholism, immorality, and school dropouts.

Some Muslim mothers understand well their responsibilities in the upbringing of their children

and take it as their priority number one above and over everything else. There are quite a several Muslim women who feel that they can perfectly pursue their careers as well as be remarkable mothers to their children and that both can be done simultaneously with proper planning, patience, and commitment (Cheruvallil, 2016). A woman's worth should not be determined by her ability to bear children. On the contrary, they can bring social change in their various fields such as teachers, doctors, nurses, managers, social workers and many more (Glenn, 1994).

METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative approach in its research design and data analysis. The study finding was analysed according to the data from the field in line with the objectives.

The study utilised both secondary and primary methods. Published articles and scholarly publications on motherhood in Islam, women in Islam, and the role of Muslim mothers in raising children were used as secondary sources of data. The primary data was obtained using semi-structured interviews with professional Muslim women currently working in different areas. This was helpful in understanding the phenomenon under investigation and clarified their perception of motherhood in Islam and how they are balancing the two. It gave the insightful experience of a mother who is working and who has to delegate household responsibility to a helper. It also sheds some light on whether professional mothers are a source of the entire problem that has plagued society by their negligence in upbringing.

Two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held using an interview guide and each session lasted for a period of 120 minutes. In general, the two focus group discussions were to enlighten on the textual roles of mothers in Islam based on the holy scripture of the Quran and the sayings of the prophet, which is also referred to as the Sunnah and make a comparison between the old and the new generation of parenting, in order to draw some similarities and differences. The first FGD comprised 17 participants, and the purpose was to understand the position of Muslim Mothers in raising children as taught in the Quran and the Sunnah and what could

be the cause of the social decadence in the society such as disobedience, school dropouts, drug and substance abuse, alcoholism, homosexuality, lesbianism, and sexual harassment. The second FGD involved 13 participants and aimed at understanding the balance between motherhood and professional roles and how contemporary Muslim mothers are struggling to balance the two, and if the struggle is for same for other mothers from different backgrounds as them.

The study was carried out in Nairobi and Nakuru counties; these areas were chosen since they represent the cosmopolitan nature of Kenyan Muslim women with a good number of professional Muslim mothers with whom I have interacted and raised a big concern on their daily scuffle of attending to both professional responsibility and motherhood role.

The target population for this study was Professional Muslim mothers currently working or not working from a different ethnic background and professional area residing within the two target areas. The second target group is non-professional old Muslim mothers aged between 60 to 80 years, also residents in the two target counties. The Key Informant Interviews and the FGDs participants were selected using snowballing due to the researcher's own experience and contact persons.

The FGDs sessions were very touching and real, especially the one on professional mothers since a lot of anecdotal stories came about concerning their struggle in maintaining their job and carrying out their responsibility as mothers. At times the house help just leaves without any notice; hence the mother is left alone with the kids and has to report to work too. As the researcher's own role as a struggling professional mother came into account, she was able to identify with some of the stories shared and resonated with her own experience. The FGDs were audio recorded and later transcribed and thematically analysed according to the objectives of the study. However, the semi-structured interviews have never been recorded; the researcher herself was taking notes.

The anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents were upheld during the FGDs and the Interviews. A consent form was issued to the participants giving them the details of the research.

They were told about the purpose of the research and the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to either decline to participate or withdraw from participation at any given time if they feel so.

FINDINGS

The findings are categorised according to the experiences of the working mothers in terms of their struggle in parenting, putting a balance between career and motherhood, and the role of the fathers and community in complementing those of the mothers. It also explains the old generation of parenting, modern parental techniques, and any commonality between the two.

Young Career Muslim Women and Motherhood

The traditional roles of Muslim mothers as demonstrated by all the interviewed women are cooking, sweeping, teaching, feeding the young ones, cleaning the dishes, taking care of the young ones, attending to the needs of the older children, guiding, advising the teenagers, fetching water, weaving mats, and nursing.

“Muslim mothers are supposed to cook, clean, and take care of the needs of the family members, educate their children to become pious kids and also advise them when necessary”.

Most of the Muslim women interviewed have acknowledged their crucial place in the upbringing of children and they asserted that mothers are the ideal homemakers, nurturers, trainers, and caregivers of the children. Even for those in careers, mothers who decide to work for one reason or the other are filled with guilt and feel that they are not there when the children need them the most.

“I feel that I am better placed to take care of the educational, psychological, and even the spiritual needs of the children, especially when they are young and the father has other roles that Allah has given them. The father is supposed to feed, dress, and shelter the children and be their role model”.

“Allah has given each parent a different responsibility and our responsibility as mothers is to bring up the children as good Muslims, teaching them good manners, guiding, and giving them unconditional love and affection. Attending to their needs and health, although there are good fathers who can take care of their kids, but most of them are not patient and do not have the capacity to understand the needs of the kids. They expect kids to behave like adults and most of the time results in bad relationship between the father and the kids as they become hard on them. Another reason is that the fathers feel that they are meant to be home to take care of the kids; hence when they find themselves in such a situation, they vent out their frustration and anger on the kids under their care”.

“I am not happy where I am because my kid is being taken care of by my house help and this is affecting our bond. I feel guilty all the time, and that is why I believe that mothers are not supposed to be working outside the house. If their needs are met, they should stay at home and take care of the family members as that is the best thing for them to do and it is rewarding in this life and in the hereafter”.

Other Muslim mothers interviewed believed that women could balance their careers and motherhood depending on their commitment and patience. Mothers can help in changing society in their different careers as doctors, engineers, teachers, and social workers. Mothers who are educated and working are able to develop themselves, their families, and the entire nation due to economic gains. Women, as daughters, wives, and mothers have a responsibility to safeguard the social fabric of the community and are not confined to the stereotypical roles of domestic workers. Muslim women have the advantage of excellent performance in their duty as leaders, professionals, caregivers, and activists and in Islamic history, they are remembered for their exceptional authority as teachers and scholars of the sacred text and law.

“I can be a wonderful mother and at the same time a successful career woman. Because there is more to a woman than just being a mother,

they can give back to society and contribute positively”.

The women asserted that mothers are the first and probably the most influential teachers of children and they have a great impact on their upbringing. The women interviewed had different levels of understanding of their religion, but one aspect that stood out was the crucial role of the mother in the lives of the children, whether a homestay or working mother.

“Mothers play the most important roles in society because a child can survive without a father but not a mother”.

A few feel that women are not supposed to be working outside the home since their absence causes a lot of issues. Mothers need to prioritise their motherhood over their education or career; even then, these mothers still believe that a balance can be possible.

“My kids need me all the time and it becomes hard for me to delegate my responsibility to others; I cannot handle the guilt that comes with it. I believe that if women have someone to take care of, whether she is a daughter, a sister, a mother, or a wife, she does not need to work. It is the responsibility of the male in society to take care of the female as the father, the brother, the son, and the husband. And if it happens that the woman must work because of one reason or the other, I agree that she can balance being a career woman and a mother”.

Single parenting has been seen as a challenge and most of the women interviewed acknowledged the complementary role of the fathers. They agreed that children require a father figure in their life as a role model although almost all women interviewed saw their mothers as role models.

Generational parenting and change

Many young mothers interviewed agreed that the way they were brought up and how they are parenting their children now is different. During their mothers and grandmother’s time, women lived by the patriarchal reading of the texts; they had less understood of their rights.

“Our mums and grandmoms did not understand the religion very well and lived by the traditional understanding of motherhood that was not necessarily Islam. Their roles were limited to motherhood such that their worth was measured as per the number of children and the upbringing of kids”.

The past generation of mothers were not educated and spent most of their time at home with the kids; hence their priority number one was the upbringing of the kids. They had to do all the household chores of cleaning, cooking, washing the dishes, feeding, taking care of the young ones, and to attend to the needs of the older kids. Contemporary mothers are educated and career women who at some point, delegate their responsibility to others, especially when they are not available.

The elderly mothers interviewed pointed out that modern mothers have neglected their responsibility of taking care of their children, and it is taking a toll on the future generation.

“The modern mothers have prioritised their career over their motherhood responsibility, mothers have become absent parents in the lives of their children. They feel like strangers to each other because they rarely spend time together. During our time, we know where our kids go and what they do and who their friends are”

“The deteriorating social, moral and educational values especially among the youth in the society is as a result of the mothers’ neglect of their responsibilities and something needs to be done”.

CONCLUSION

There is a continuous struggle of modern Muslim mothers who are at the same time professionals. At the same time, they understand the crucial role they play in the upbringing of the future generation and they believe it is their responsibility to do so. They are more into their motherhood role than their education and career. There are a number of factors that push the mothers to work outside the house and they include but are not limited to single parenthood, individual passion for following their dreams, and the lack of responsible male figure to

take care of them. In this fast-changing and growing world, working women have got the opportunity and the resource to uplift the society on Islamic values and stand against injustices and corruption. Women have the potential to bring a positive change in society by following their dream and passion.

Women have the capacity and the strength to balance their career and motherhood responsibilities. Motherhood is one of many roles that Muslim women can play that brings meaningful purpose to their lives. They believe that they have what it takes to be both a professional and a mother because they are needed not only inside the house but outside. Even those who prioritise their education or career over their motherhood roles, at some point, feel the guilt of neglecting their rightful responsibility. Most of the working women interviewed attested to a certain degree of complexity because they feel that someone else is there for their children when they need their mother the most.

There are some who believe that the decrease in social morality and conduct in Muslim society is the result of mothers abrogating their responsibility to upbringing their children. This could be true because society is experiencing all sorts of problems of which some never existed. This could be explained in two ways; it is either because no one used to talk about it or it never was there. Working women have delegated their responsibility of taking care of the children and have entrusted this responsibility to others. This has reduced the bond between them and the children and also the ability to understand them better because they do not spend quality time together.

The responsibilities of Muslim women are not limited. They are vast and varied from establishing a strong family fabric to building a society free from all vices and immoralities. Muslim mothers’ role is crucial for the future of their communities; they either nourish or decay the future generations, as they are the first teachers and role models of their children. The responsibility of the Muslim woman has been doubled due to the destruction of the social order, which is the fundamental principle of Islam. Muslim women should not be confined to the stereotype or the traditional roles of domestic life but should be given the opportunity and the resource

to bring equilibrium to the fast-changing Muslim Ummah.

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