

THE STATUS AND ROLE OF WOMEN IN FEMINIST POLITICAL THEORY AND ISLAM

Introduction

Feminism is sometimes referred to the belief that women should enjoy the same political, economic, and social rights as men. It is also defined as a broad-based philosophical perspective on women's rights and their position and role in the society as a whole. Grimshaw aptly points out that there is not "a brief and clear definition in a sentence or so, which would enable them to look quickly at ideas, arguments, political convictions or programmes, and so forth, and say at a glance whether they should count as feminist." (Grimshaw 1986, 7)

However, a careful reading of the history of feminism and the contemporary women's liberation movement suggests that feminism is a western philosophy on the nature, position, role, and rights of women in general. It at first advocated equal rights for women but has now turned into a radical, revolutionary movement for restructuring the society while demolishing, as they understand it, the male-dominated family system and sociopolitical structure.

History and Philosophy

Feminism is generally traced back to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in the West. It originated from the demands for the natural rights of individuals during that period of revolutionary political thinking. In the West, from the time of ancient Greek civilization, women had been denied all their rights and looked down upon morally, socially, physically, and intellectually. They enjoyed no legal rights and were regarded as inferior to men in all aspects. Even in Christian Europe, women were accused of being the root cause of all evils, troubles, and human ills. Few rights of inheritance or of acquiring and holding property were given to them. They were not granted any right of divorce either, even if they registered their greatest complaints against their husbands. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, some reformations were made as to their rights and status, such as the rights of marriage and divorce and some economic. However, women during the eighteenth century were not satisfied with these limited rights and a few reformatory acts were demanded on the basis of equality of sex.

COUPLES PREFERENCES FOR EMPLOYMENT, THE DIVISION OF FAMILY LABOUR AND WOMEN'S DISTRESS

Introduction

This study describes the home lives of employed women and their partners/husbands in terms of the division of labour (household chores and child care) and congruity between the couple with regard to their preferences about the women's employment status (i.e., whether or not the women worked outside the home), in relation to women's levels of psychological distress. In the sample of 120 English couples, the results showed considerable inequality in the division of labour within the home between the women and their partners. Regardless of their occupational status, the women reported spending significantly more time on household chores and child care than did their partners. Greater inequality predicted greater distress among the women at Time 2 (a period of 8 months from the first assessment) relative to Time 1. The findings also demonstrated that women who preferred to be employed and stayed in full-time employment despite their husbands preferring them not to work (giving rise to incongruence) had significantly higher symptoms of psychological distress at Time 2. The women's own preference for working, however, was not predictive of their levels of distress. These findings suggest that one partner's behaviour may spill over to affect the well-being of the other.

With more couples adopting life-styles in which both members have jobs outside the home, the traditional model of co-ordinating work and family life, with the husband as breadwinner and the wife as home-maker, may no longer be viable. As men become more involved with their families and women with job-related demands, increased levels of conflict between work and family may result. Researchers have begun to examine the work-family conflict as a source of stress that may influence well-being (e.g., Bacharach, Bamberger and Conley, 1991; Frone, Russell and Cooper, 1992; Voydanoff, 1987). Work-family conflict may also function as an intervening pathway through which conditions at work affect the quality of family life and vice versa (Bacharach, Bamberger and Conley, 1991; Frone, Russell and Cooper, 1992).

One important area of the work-family relationship is the home lives of families in which both partners are employed. Thus, one objective of the present

WOMEN AND DIVORCE : LEGAL RESPONSE

Introduction

The purpose of this study is not to make detail proposals but rather to indicate a new direction in which the government could help support and protect the family. The Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr. Mahathir Mohammad has emphasized in his Vision 2020¹ that society has a sound and reasonable interest in actively promoting the nuclear family as the chosen shelter for bringing up children who will take charge of the future.² To achieve these objectives, proposed reforms relating to divorce should be targeted with a view to relieve any problems relating to women and children. This proposal arises from the fact that, under the present divorce laws, the terms of exit from marriage are disadvantageous for almost all women in traditional or quasi-traditional marriages in Malaysia.

Practically, women have a share in promoting the nuclear family, since they bear a disproportional share of the hardship of its failure. Economically and socially, women everywhere are made vulnerable, by the historical correlation of female responsibility for bringing up children with female subordination and dependence.

The current practices of marriage itself contribute to economic inequalities between women and men. Okin suggested that the arrival of a child is most often the point where the wife becomes economically dependent.³ Although this economically subordinate situation of women frequently remains concealed during marriage, it becomes instantly obvious on marriage breakdown, at which point the poverty of women develops into a public problem.⁴

Women carry far greater responsibility for domestic duties and children, whether or not they work outside the home. Constraints built into society limits women in their efforts to be successful providers for their families. (Low level jobs and low-level wages typically paid to women employees keeps them from earning incomes that would adequately support them and their children.)⁵ The combination of domestic duties and unrewarding employment act as a strong deterrent to women working outside the home and so actually discourage them from doing so. Therefore, a woman's weak position in the labour market, which is itself a consequence of women's domestic role, in turn reinforces their subordination in the home.

MALAYSIAN WOMEN IN THE PERFORMING ARTS AND THE "NON-"ISSUE OF FEMALE STEREOTYPING

Introduction

Women have always been an essential part of the performing arts tradition in Malaysia, but significant social change in the nation has also brought with it important changes in the way women have been depicted and involved in that tradition. Initially, women created theatre mainly among themselves, most notably in mak yong and joget gamelan troupes, and audiences for these performances, whether court or community-based, comprised both male and female viewers. Single gender forms gave women the opportunity to play both male and female roles and although the characters they played veered towards the stereotypic, cross-gender casting gave women the opportunity to play a wider range of role types than casting by gender might have allowed.

With the advent of bangsawan in the final quarter of the 19th century, women had the opportunity to perform with men in plays that dealt primarily with legendary tales, but occasionally with contemporary themes as well. Even though they were relegated to female-only roles that were often delineated by stereotyping, they could, along with male cast members, make a living for the first time pursuing their art. The star system brought prominent female performers to public attention. Along with the glamour of success, however, women, as well as men, were subjected to critical comments by some segments of society concerning their more modern lifestyle.

Since the decline of bangsawan after World War II, and the rise of the modern theatre in Malaysia, women have remained significant figures in the theatrical community. Initially their significance lay mainly in performance, but slowly over the years, women have come to engage in all aspects of theatre production and to pursue specific training in these fields. Today we find women playwrights, producers, directors, choreographers, technical designers, lecturers, group leaders, scholars, critics, etc. Just as Malaysia itself comprises a culturally diverse population, so too, the responses of women artists/critics to the issue of female stereotyping in contemporary theatre is in many respects varied and individual. That is, in the responses 15 theatre-involved women gave to a set of interview questions dealing in particular with the issue of female stereotyping, areas where individual responses stand out as well as areas