

ROLE OF THE INSTITUTION OF FAMILY IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIETIES

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Introduction

The road to human progress and prosperity and development of peaceful societies passes through the institution of family. Strong families based on husband-wife marriage serve as the central institution for transmitting to future generations the moral strength, traditions and values required for responsible citizens and progressive societies that sustain civilizations.

In Islam, ‘marriage’ is a sacred social contract between man and woman that imposes rights and duties designed for procreation, care and upbringing of children. The two related aspects are: firstly, sexuality should serve personal satisfaction and dignity¹ and secondly, God creates partnership between a man and a woman to achieve comfort, love and mercy provided by the family. Thus, there can be no development, or the development would be meaningless, until and unless the society and its fundamental unit are at peace from within and without. Due to this Divine wisdom all Abrahamic faiths Judaism, Christianity, and Islam view Heterosexual marriage as the only valid way for a couple to acquire the true satisfaction and high dignity without disturbing social order.

Universal Human Rights Declaration² stipulates that the family is the natural and fundamental unit of every society where it plays a key role in providing conducive environment for the harmonious development of its members. A number of other internationally agreed instruments³ affirm the vital role of family in society, acknowledge its key role in fostering social development, cohesion and integration, and underscore its primary responsibility for nurturing, guidance, and protection of children for holistic development of their personality, which contribute to building responsible and peaceful societies.

All societies, therefore, have a compelling interest to resist attempts to redefine, legalize and promote the concept of ‘genderless marriage’, which deinstitutionalizes the institution of traditional marriage and concomitantly deform the values underlying the family and society. United Nations, while celebrating the 20th anniversary of the International Year of the Family at Human Rights Council, during its 26th Session, adopted a resolution on Protection of Family, which highlights the centrality of the importance of preservation of family values⁴.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation’s (OIC) position on family and marriage is guided by the teachings of the Islamic faith and the major international conventions and agreements. The OIC Charter⁵ has established the need to “emphasize, promote and protect the role of

¹ The Qur’an 30:21

² Article 16 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights

³ Article 23 of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

Article 10 of International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights

Article 44 of Convention on Rights of Migrant Workers

Preamble of Convention on the Rights of the Child

⁴ HRC Resolution HRC/26/L.20/Rev.1

⁵ OIC Charter Article 1 (14 &15) https://www.oic-oci.org/upload/documents/charter/en/oic_charter_2018_en.pdf

the family as the natural and core unit of society” which is based on the OIC Member States’ recognition of the importance of the family unit and its role in terms of upbringing, education and protection of the individual as a main foundation from which one acquires moral and religious references and ethical paradigms that inspire his conduct. Therefore, there is an immense interest in empowering the institution of marriage and family and preserving its values to achieve social cohesion and sustainable development.

OIC, is also convinced that a strong family provides the right ingredients for nurturing of well-rounded future generations in an environment free of discrimination and violence. Children raised under the patronage of good families are not only well equipped to face different economic and intellectual challenges but also possess balanced personalities that are crucial to maintaining socio-cultural and humanistic values of respective societies. Hence, again the need to protecting the institution of family by all States as part of their social responsibility and human rights obligation.

Challenges faced by families:

Despite the wide acknowledgment of the valuable role played by the institution of Family, this institution continues to face various challenges in different parts of the world. In certain cases, these challenges relate to social and economic development of particular societies, whereas in other cases family unit is affected by natural and manmade disasters including natural calamities, conflicts and epidemics. Among the most vulnerable to such challenges are families that are headed by single parents, in particular women, elderly, disabled or poor. Aggravating factors which relate to their social or political status such as minorities, displacement, refugees, migrants, under foreign occupation or caught in an armed conflict add to the miseries of each family member in particular women, children, elderly and disabled who become vulnerable to different forms of discrimination and violence.

These challenges seriously affect the well-being of the affected families and consequently affect the smooth development of their respective societies. But despite these challenges, the natural, physical and moral, bondage provided within a family enables it to stand all types of difficulties, go beyond the call of duty and to ensure the well-being of its members. History has repeatedly proven that the family remains the most powerful, most effective and, by far, the most economical system not only for confronting various challenges but also for building competence and character. Hence, it is pertinent to acknowledge and emphasize the contribution of family both as the fundamental unit of society and the fundamental agent for sustainable, social, economic and cultural development.

Role of Family in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

Over the years there has been a lot of talk about the need to ensure sustainable development, which can bring meaningful progress for all segments of the society in particular those living less privileged lives. The concept of sustainable development refers to a holistic development i.e. progress not just on economic but also the socio-cultural and environmental fronts. Thus, ensuring the sustainability of development across time by meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of the future generations to manage and meet

their own. Sustainable development is also commonly known as the process of enhancing the quality of life of a community between two points in time.

Realizing the importance of sustainable development, both for the present and future generations, on 25th September 2015, the United Nations adopted a set of 17 Goals (commonly known as SDGs)⁶ as part of its new sustainable development agenda to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all by the year 2030. Also, known as 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it envisages a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, shared economic progress and prosperity in accordance with rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination.

The central goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development focus on ending poverty, promoting shared economic prosperity, social development and people's well-being. Though the concept of family is not mentioned explicitly in the SDGs, it is part of many of them and some of the targets refer directly or indirectly to it. The specific SDG targets (1-5), which relate to elimination of poverty, promotion of health and education, gender equality, youth unemployment and ending violence - can all be positively impacted by well-designed family-focused policies. In this sense, families are enabling agents for achieving these SDGs. Therefore, from a policy perspective, focusing on family in the implementation of SDGs has a potential to speed up the achievements of many targets relating to individuals' well-being.

Family policies must be the mainstay of national public policies, and the most meaningful vehicle for governments to influence the living standards of people. Well-designed interventions to address family poverty have positive spill-overs on education and health. Hence, the progress of families will inevitably influence the progress of the communities and societies of which they are part of.

In the words of Mr. Kofi Annan, the former UN Secretary General *“the very achievement of development goals depends on how well families are empowered to contribute to the achievement of those goals.”*⁷ Thus, policies focusing on improving the well-being of families are certain to benefit development.” This statement aptly highlights the importance of investing in protecting the institution of family, the need for crafting and implementing relevant national policies that support them, as a key component that play an important role in national efforts to achieve SDGs.

Role of OIC in promoting the institution of family for SDGs:

In furtherance of this approach, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in its 2nd Ten-year Program of Action-2025⁸ calls for provision of effective social services for the family, women, children, the aged and people with special needs. OIC has also adopted many resolutions⁹, which reflect the importance it attaches to enabling the institution of family as

⁶ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>

⁷ <http://www.unicef-irc.org/article/1815-could-families-be-the-key-to-achieving-the-sdgs.html>

⁸ <https://www.oic-oci.org/docdown/?docID=16&refID=5>

⁹ First OIC Ministerial Conference on Marriage and Family Institution's Empowerment and Value Preservation in Member States <https://www.oic-oci.org/docdown/?docID=601&refID=4>

part of its priority given to promoting peaceful and sustainably developed societies. OIC philosophy of preservation, empowerment and transformation of family stresses the importance and role of education, training, knowledge transfer, talent building and preparation of family for dynamic roles in sustainable development. It also emphasizes socio-political stability, cultural unity, economic development and dynamic cooperation among member countries so as to valorize resources, exchange best practices and engage in mutually beneficial activities and programs. It also calls for elaboration of appropriate legislative and administrative measures to combat violence within the family and promote gender justice.

OIC institutions too, in collaboration with the Member States, are taking practical steps to eliminate abject poverty among families and activate their role in the achievement of economic development. These institutions, in their development plans, have accorded priority to achieving family's cohesion and to that end have set benchmarks to evaluate the impact of all social and economic programs for the benefit of family stability, generational connection and social and food security, along with extending health services. Achieving gender equality, ensuring education for all children as well as imbuing them with the family values since childhood, surrounding them with social protection, supporting the family in providing care for the elderly and those with special needs, in addition to adopting and implementing effective laws and policies to eliminate violence against women and girls within the framework of the family institution, have also been prioritized.

The OIC Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC) serves as the Expert Advisory Group on human rights issues to the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers. It has repeatedly emphasized the importance of extending protection and facilitation to the institution of family by all Member States as a key factor in their sustainable development policies and programs. During the recent reviews of OIC human rights instruments namely the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam and OIC Covenant on Rights of Child in Islam, IPHRC has put special focus on the empowerment of women and protection of child rights in a manner to further strengthen the institution of family together with the need to eliminate all forms of violence in family.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Based on the above, it makes sense that policies and programs that aim at strengthening the institution of family, directly contribute to the sustainable development of corresponding societies. Hence, it is a **legal and moral imperative for all countries to devise family friendly policies and measures at all levels.** While devising such policies, States must have active participation and inputs of all members of family including contributions from the non-governmental organizations, civil society, media and other stakeholders with a view to ensuring effective implementation.

Values based (in particular moral and religious) societies also have the obligations to deploy all efforts to protect the institution of family against contemporary social challenges based on their societal values. Involvement of family members in devising such policies will have meaningful impact both in the implementation as well as achieving desired development results.

Having realized the significance of family in achieving SDGs (particularly SDG 1-5 relating to elimination of poverty, promotion of health and education, gender equality, youth unemployment and ending violence), **it is imperative for all States to include families as a nucleus of their development plans and policies.** To this end, sharing of good practices and challenges faced by families among countries would help devise human rights friendly solutions.

Poverty remains the most daunting challenge/obstacle in the realization of universal human rights. It also affects human dignity and societal cohesion. Accordingly, States must ensure societal participation of family members in sustainable development activities by: a) **offering grants and micro-credits to enable the beneficiary families to set up income-earning projects;** b) supporting farming families with machinery and equipment and facilitating the formation of agricultural cooperatives to assist families in marketing their produce and at the same time; c) **elaborating and executing a balance between work duties and the family requisites for achieving generational connection and cohesion.**

It is also recommended that all States should establish benchmarks to evaluate the impact of their economic and social programs for the benefit of the institution of family. **This evaluation should be done regularly with the full involvement of all relevant stakeholders including the family.** To initiate the evidence-based policy making, collection of reliable disaggregated data is crucial. States should also establish quality research institutions on family issues both to collect data as well as to evaluate and design relevant policies.

Last but not the least, sustainable development is not possible without sustainable families, which create, nurture and develop robust, well rounded, morally and socially strong human beings through proper upbringing. Hence, the need for States to ensure full and effective implementation of SDG-16, which relates to specific protections granted to family members.
