

Guest Editorial

Ethics of Care and Daycares

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Ethics is the branch of normative philosophy which deals with moral values. It has been struggling since thousands of years to answer the dilemmas like whether means employed are important or the end; intentions matter or the outcome; individual interests come first or the collective and in our own times we have seen the heated debates over issues like data privacy vis a vis security concerns; positive discrimination versus equality; extent of choice in planned parenthood (prochoice) vs prolife; euthanasia vs suicide and so on. Similarly, philosophers have been grappling with the idea of listing few basic ethics. In order to make the discussion structured, there have been enlisting of arguable virtues and then further segregating them between relative and absolute ones. This discourse led to ethical relativism, which argues that there are no right or wrong moral values in absolute terms but are contextually defined.

The debates in ethics went on fine not until the twentieth century when the feministic philosophers noted that these debates are heavily lopsided and have very conveniently ignored a basic virtue, care, which is foundational to all human relations. All the human relations have two very basic aspects: one who is caring and the other who is cared for and the reciprocity of the same relationship (also referred to as interdependence in human relations). These philosophers (Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings being the most important among them who for the first time argued comprehensively that care is the foundation of

morality) noted that all other ethical values may be contextual but caring and compassion for others is intrinsic to all human beings thus freeing this desirable quality from ethical relativism. Engrossment and motivational displacement became the cornerstones of ethics of care (similar to empathy or negative capability in poetic terms). Care as a moral virtue even transcends the binaries as discussed above in the example of dilemmas. This historical omission led the feminists to believe that care as a moral value has either been left out or downplayed in these discussions as the domain of care was historically populated by women who are trained from the very childhood (thanks to fairytales etc.) to think of virtues in relational terms.

This philosophical neglect in the academic discourse was not limited to the scholars and academicians only but found its expression in the real world too when the needs of the caregivers were ignored while formulating public policies. The most obvious fact that care was essential to survival was deliberately overlooked as this value was seen as feminine and the public policies catered ostensibly to men only.

When women started entering labour markets, the responsibilities of care became harder to shoulder as they had to split their time and energy between the role of caregiver (assigned to them traditionally and culturally since times immemorial) and that of an efficient worker. As more and more women came forward to share the burden of providing for the family, it did not automatically take some of her burden off of caregiver by being shared by men around her. Those upholding the ethics of care were burnt out juggling newer roles with the traditional



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one. This was the point when it was realized that providing a daycare facility to working mothers allow them to bring some of the work-life balance in their lives.

Ethics of care focuses at promoting the welfare and well-being of the care givers and the care receivers. For the infant and toddlers, the quality daycare at the workplace are the means to make well-being of both the mothers and the children a possibility. Nel Noddings differentiates between natural caring and ethical caring. For the author of this article a mother's taking care of the children is natural caring and that of an employer providing for the daycare facility falls under ethical caring. For Noddings, latter is a superior virtue.

In Pakistan's labour laws, there is three to six months statutory maternity leave which effectively means that a mother has to choose between going back to work or to quit working to look after her few weeks old infant, not mentioning those many economically disadvantaged mothers for whom work is not a matter of choice.

A bill is long pending in the national legislature for making daycare centers mandatory for any establishment having a workforce of more than seventy employees. Forcing the employers through enactments may not be a very feasible option in the current situation of economic meltdown but this problem does require an out of box thinking. In the first stage, instead of asking the private entrepreneurs for the same, government can lead through example by providing daycare centers in all public establishments. Government of Punjab has experimented the same, a decade ago, very successfully by setting up a daycare fund to provide financial and advisory assistance to the institutions setting up the quality centers. The wider penetration of the daycare centers do not only make the female labour force demand a similar facility at their workplace but also makes the employers realize that the idea of a daycare center is totally workable and only requires a will to implement. These daycares which were once considered a luxury for the mothers and were provided by a very few service providers only and that too at very exorbitant rates have become

a genuine need of the working mothers.

Child-care has been observed as the singular most effective factor to increase participation of the women in labour force. In the countries where the education level of both the genders is comparable, childcare has been the decisive factor in increasing women participation in the labour force. It has further been noticed that the distance of the daycare also matters. Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months and partial breast feeding for two years, as advised by health experts, is only possible if the daycare center is available at the workplace. Many an establishment do provide this facility, though the number is not very large, and women are able to nurse their children along with their work.

The impact of a quality daycare is many folds. It does not only enable women to work in productive sectors but also has its impact on the child's learning and development due to early education, which is well-documented.

In a country like Pakistan where a significant number of female medical graduates, who studied at the expense of the state exchequer, prefer to be stay-at-home mothers after marriage can benefit hugely from the quality daycares at the medical facilities and the beneficiary would not only be the mothers or their children but the health sector and ultimately the society. This initiative can prove to be the game changer and the ultimate incentive to the young medical graduates to join the ranks of their colleagues in paying back to their country and also enrich themselves professionally and personally in the process. Women empowerment is not only about giving quotas or larger share to women but also to enable them to get benefitted from those quotas. More than anything else, it is a quality daycare which goes a long way in retaining mothers in the workforce and to impact their output positively.

Reference

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