1704 - Does a Wife Have to Cook and Clean?

the question

Is it the wife's duty to do all the housework, must the husband help her or not? Or is it possible that her work is just a favour to the husband and the family and she will be rewarded for it, as if she gave sadaqah?

Summary of answer

It is the wife’s duty to serve her husband within the bounds of what is reasonable and as other wives who are like her serve husbands who are like him.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Should the wife serve her husband?

The more correct view in this matter is that stated by a number of scholars, such as Abu Bakr ibn Abi Shaybah, Abu Ishaq al-Jawzjani and Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on them), who said that it is the woman’s duty to serve her husband within the bounds of what is reasonable and as other women who are like her serve husbands who are like him.

She also has to take care of the house, doing things like cooking and so on, in accordance with what is customary among people like her and her husband. This differs according to circumstances, time and place, hence Ibn Taymiyah said: This varies according to circumstances. What the Bedouin wife has to do is not the same as what the urban wife has to do.

Evidence for the view that it is a woman’s duty to serve her husband

The evidence for this more correct opinion is:

- the Hadith of al-Bukhari:

Imam al-Bukhari narrated in his Sahih that Fatimah (may Allah be pleased with her), the daughter of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) asked him for a servant. He said, Shall I not tell you of something that is better for you than that? When you go to sleep, say Subhan-Allah (Glory be to Allah) thirty three times, Al-Hamdu Lillah (praise be to Allah) thirty three times, and Allahu akbar (Allah is Most Great) thirty four times. (Sahih al-Bukhari bi Sharh al-Asqalani, part 9/506)

Al-Tabari said, in his commentary on this Hadith: “We may understand from this Hadith that every woman who is able to take care of her house by making bread, grinding flour and so on, should do so. It is not the duty of the husband if it is the custom for women like her to do this themselves.”

What we learn from the Hadith is that when Fatimah (may Allah be pleased with her) asked her father (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) for a servant, he did not command her husband to find her a servant or hire someone to do these tasks, or to do these tasks himself. If it were Ali’s duty to do these things, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) would have commanded him to do them.

- The Hadith of Asma bint Abi Bakr

Imam al-Bukhari (may Allah have mercy on him) reported in his Sahih that Asma bint Abi Bakr (may Allah be pleased with her) said: I got married to al-Zubayr, and he had no wealth on earth and no slaves, nothing except a camel for bringing water and his horse. I used to feed his horse and bring water, and I used to sew patches on the bucket. I made dough but I was not good at baking bread, so my (female) neighbours among the Ansar used to bake bread for me, and they were sincere women. I used to bring date pits from al-Zubayr’s land that the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) had given to him, carrying them on my head. This land was two-thirds of a farsakh away. One day I came, carrying the date pits on my head, and I met the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), who had a group of the Ansar with him. He called me and made his camel kneel down for me to ride behind him, but I felt too

shy to go with the men, and I remembered al-Zubayr and his jealousy, for he was the most jealous of people. The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) realized that I felt shy, so he moved on. I came to al-Zubayr and told him, I met the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) when I was carrying date pits on my head, and he had a group of his Companions with him. He made his camel kneel down for me to ride with him, but I remembered your jealousy. He said, By Allah, it bothers me more that you have to carry the date pits than that you should ride with him. Asma said: After that, Abu Bakr sent me a servant to take care of the horse, and it was as if I had been liberated from slavery. (Reported by al-Bukhari, Fath, 9/319).

In the commentary on the Hadith of Asma, it says: “From this incident we may understand that it is the woman's duty to take care of everything that her husband needs her to take care of. This was the opinion of Abu Thawr. Other fuqaha suggested that Asma did this voluntarily and that she was not obliged to do it.”

Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani said:

“It seems that this incident Asma carrying the date pits to help her husband and other similar incidents were the matter of necessity, namely that her husband al-Zubayr and other Muslim men were preoccupied with jihad and other things that the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) had commanded them to do, and they did not have time to take care of domestic matters themselves, and could not afford to hire servants to do that for them, and there was no one else who could do that apart from their womenfolk. So the women used to take care of the home and whoever lived in it, so that the men could devote their time to supporting Islam.

Then he said (may Allah have mercy on him): What is more likely is that the matter had to do with the customs in that land, for customs may vary in this regard.

It seems that what Ibn Hajar said is close to the view of those who say that the wife has to take care of her husband and the home in accordance with the dictates of local custom.

Ibn al-Qayyim said, concerning the story of Asma: When the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah

be upon him) saw Asma with the date pits on her head, and her husband al-Zubayr was with her, he did not tell him that she did not have to serve him, or that this was unfair to her. He approved of her serving him and of all the women among the Sahabah helping their husbands. This is a matter concerning which there is no doubt.

- The Hadith of Jabir

The Shaykh of the Muhaddithin, Imam al-Bukhari (may Allah have mercy on him) reported in his Sahih that Jabir ibn ‘Abd-Allah said: My father died and left seven daughters, or nine daughters. I married a woman who had been previously married, and the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said to me, Did you get married, O Jabir? I said, Yes. He asked, A virgin or a previously-married woman? I said, A previously-married woman. He said, Why not a young woman so you could play and joke with one another? I said, ‘Abd-Allah [the father of Jabir] has died and left behind daughters, and I would not like to bring them someone who is like them, so I got married to a woman who can take care of them. He said, May Allah bless you or Fair enough. (Sahih al-Bukhari bi Sharh al-Asqalani, vol.9/513).

The evidence derived from the Hadith of Jabir is that al-Bukhari introduced this Hadith under the heading, Bab ‘awn al-marah zawjaha fi waladih (Chapter: a woman helping her husband with his children).

Imam Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani said, commenting on this introduction by al-Bukhari: It seems that al-Bukhari derived the idea that a woman should take care of her husband’s children from the fact that the wife of Jabir took care of his sisters; if she should take care of his sisters then it is even more befitting that she should take of his children. (Sahih al-Bukhari bi Sharh al-Asqalani, vol.9/513).

We can say that the wife should take care of her husband, as this is more befitting than her taking care of his sisters or his daughters from another wife.

We may also understand from this Hadith that what was customary at the time of the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) was that women did not only take care of their

husbands, they also took care of those who were dependent on their husbands and lived in their houses.

The evidence that this understanding is correct is the fact that the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) did not tell Jabir off for his reason for marrying a previously-married woman, which was that she could take care of his sisters. This indicates that the custom among the Muslims at that time dictated that the wife should take care of those who were under her husband's care, which means that the wife should serve her husband in those matters that are dictated by local custom, because the husband's right to be served by his wife comes before that of his sisters.

- 'Urf (custom)

General contracts including marriage contracts should be governed by the customs that are known among the people, and the custom is that the wife should serve her husband and also take care of matters in the home. In some societies, the custom is that the wife should take care of more than the regular domestic matters.

Imam al-Qurtubi said, concerning the matter of the wife serving her husband and taking care of the home: This has to do with 'Urf, which is one of the bases of Shari`ah. The women of the Bedouin and the desert-dwellers serve their husbands, even looking for fresh water and taking care of the animals

What happens nowadays is that the wife usually serves her husband and takes care of different matters within the home. There may be a servant to help her with that if her husband can afford it. If the husband knows that the majority of scholars say that it is not obligatory for the wife to serve her husband and take care of the house, I say that one of the benefits of this may be that he will not go to extremes and demand too much of his wife in this regard, and that he will not give her a hard time if she falls short, because what she is doing is not a duty according to the majority of jurists. However, even it is a duty according to some of them and this is what we think is more correct the fact that there is such a difference of opinion means that the husband has to look at

what she is doing as something voluntary rather than obligatory, or something in which the scholars differ as to whether it is obligatory, so he should be gentle with her if he sees that she is falling short in this regard, and he should encourage her and help her to do it.

For more, please see this category: Rights of Spouses

And Allah knows best.