

The Role of Wives as Family Breadwinners: An Islamic Legal and Sociological Perspective

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ABSTRAK

This study examines the phenomenon of wives assuming the role of family breadwinners in Muncar Village, Gemawang District, Temanggung Regency, from the perspectives of Islamic law and sociology. The research is motivated by empirical realities in which wives undertake economic responsibilities due to husbands' inability to provide financial support as a result of prolonged illness, unemployment, advanced age, or unstable employment. Employing an empirical legal research design with a qualitative approach, data were collected through field observations and in-depth interviews with wives who function as primary income earners. The findings reveal that wives engage in diverse occupations, including agricultural labor, factory work, civil service, and domestic employment, to sustain household economies. From an Islamic legal perspective, the study finds that wives' participation in income-generating activities is permissible, provided that it does not negate their primary responsibilities in managing household affairs and nurturing children. Such practices are consistent with the principles of mutual cooperation (ta'āwun), responsibility, and compassion as emphasized in the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the Compilation of Islamic Law. From a sociological perspective, the shift in wives' roles reflects broader processes of social change driven by economic pressures, rising living costs, and the need to secure children's education and family welfare. This study concludes that the role of wives as breadwinners in Muncar Village represents an adaptive social strategy that reconciles religious norms with contemporary socio-economic realities. While the obligation of financial provision remains primarily with the husband under Islamic law, wives' economic participation emerges as a pragmatic and socially inevitable response to structural constraints, reinforcing family resilience without undermining Islamic legal principles.

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Introduction

The phenomenon of wives assuming the role of family breadwinners in Muncar Village, Gemawang District, Temanggung Regency has emerged as a result of various conditions

affecting the economic function of the family. In several cases, wives are compelled to take over the breadwinning role due to husbands suffering from prolonged illness, which renders them unable to fulfill their obligation to provide for the household. Other husbands lose their capacity to work as a consequence of illnesses acquired during their period of employment, forcing them to resign and leaving them unemployed up to the present time. In addition, advanced age contributes to physical limitations that hinder husbands' ability to engage in productive work. In some instances, this phenomenon is also triggered by husbands' negligence in fulfilling their financial responsibilities toward the family, whether due to a lack of responsibility or other social factors (Husaini, Indah, Mawaddah, & Saputra, 2024).

These shifts in economic and social structures compel some wives to participate in paid work in order to meet household needs. From the perspective of Islamic law, this situation constitutes an important issue, as the primary obligation to provide for the family fundamentally rests with the husband. Nevertheless, when the husband is unable to fulfill this obligation, the wife is permitted to assume an economic role, provided that she continues to observe her primary responsibilities within the household. Meanwhile, from a sociological perspective, the transition of wives into breadwinning roles is understood as part of broader social change, particularly driven by economic pressures, the demands of modern life, and adaptive responses to increasingly flexible family structures.

Method

This study employs an empirical legal research design, focusing on how legal norms operate and are implemented within social realities. To comprehensively examine the phenomenon of wives acting as family breadwinners, a sociological approach is adopted to capture the broader social context in which this role transformation occurs. The research applies a qualitative methodology, as it is particularly suited to exploring and describing the lived experiences and social realities of wives who assume the primary economic responsibility for their households. (Lexy J. Moleong, 2009) Data were collected through field research conducted in Muncar Village, Gemawang District, Temanggung Regency, using in-depth interviews and direct observation as the main data collection techniques. These methods enabled the researcher to obtain rich, contextualized data regarding the motivations, experiences, and challenges faced by wives as breadwinners. Field notes were systematically recorded to document observational findings and interview results. The qualitative approach was selected to allow for an in-depth understanding of the socio-legal dimensions of the phenomenon and to

generate nuanced insights into the interaction between Islamic legal norms, family roles, and social change.

Results

Wives as Family Breadwinners

This section analyzes field findings concerning the role of wives as primary breadwinners in Muncar Village, Gemawang District, Temanggung Regency. In Islamic law, the provision of maintenance (nafkah) by a husband to his wife is not based on a relationship of ownership or natural entitlement of children, but rather on the husband's obligation to provide according to his capacity. When a husband neglects this obligation, the wife is entitled to seek legal remedies through the court. If the husband is proven to be negligent, the wife has the right to receive the maintenance that should have been provided. This analysis aims to identify the factors that lead wives to assume the role of primary breadwinner in Muncar Village. From this perspective, the study is grounded in two analytical frameworks—Islamic legal norms and sociological analysis which together explain why wives undertake economic responsibility within the household.

Based on field interviews, four wives were identified as primary breadwinners: Mrs. M, Mrs. YH, Mrs. Y, and Mrs. S. The findings reveal that these wives engage in diverse forms of employment. Mrs. M works as an agricultural laborer; Mrs. YH is employed as a worker in a plywood factory in Temanggung; Mrs. Y serves as a civil servant (Aparatur Sipil Negara) at SD Negeri 2 Muncar; and Mrs. S works as a domestic helper in Semarang. These occupations demonstrate the variety of livelihood strategies adopted by wives to sustain household economies.

The income earned by these women varies according to their respective occupations, yet collectively it constitutes the primary source of household sustenance. The findings indicate that wives become family breadwinners primarily because their husbands are unable to fulfill their financial obligations due to factors such as chronic illness, unemployment, or loss of work capacity. Consequently, wives assume economic responsibility to ensure the continuity and stability of family life.

Agricultural Labor for Family Survival

In Islam, women are entrusted with significant responsibilities in managing household affairs and nurturing children, as emphasized in the Prophetic tradition: "Each of you is a leader, and each of you will be held accountable for your leadership..." (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 4801). This hadith underscores that while husbands are leaders of their families, wives also

hold leadership roles within the domestic sphere. In the case of Mrs. S, whose husband experiences frequent unemployment due to insufficient income, the wife migrated to Semarang to work as a domestic helper. Although the obligation to provide maintenance remains incumbent upon the husband under all circumstances—whether wealthy or poor—Islamic law does not require a wife to provide for herself or her family unless she does so willingly. Nevertheless, when the husband is unable to meet family needs, Islamic jurisprudence permits the wife to work outside the home, provided that such employment does not harm the rights of the husband and children or result in neglect of domestic responsibilities.

Islam fundamentally does not impose the obligation of financial provision upon women, as their primary roles include pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and childrearing—functions considered essential to the quality of children's lives. Imposing the burden of breadwinning on women as an obligation would therefore constitute an injustice (Suparjo & Ayudya, 2020). However, within marital life, when husbands are unable to provide adequately, it is considered appropriate for wives to assist within the limits of their capacity and willingness.

These principles are reinforced in Indonesian Islamic family law, particularly in the Compilation of Islamic Law (KHI), Article 83 paragraph (2), which states that wives are responsible for managing daily household affairs to the best of their ability. In practice, however, the realities in Muncar Village reveal that many wives engage in paid work—such as agricultural labor, factory work, domestic service, or civil service—as a pragmatic solution to meet family needs. While fulfilling material necessities, wives are also expected to maintain their non-material roles, including emotional support for husbands and attentive care for children.

From a sociological perspective, this phenomenon can be understood through social action theory. Social action refers to individual actions that carry subjective meaning for the actor and are oriented toward others. The decision of wives to become breadwinners reflects value-rational action (wertrational), where actions are guided by deeply held values such as family survival, responsibility, and moral obligation. In some cases, affective actions—driven by emotions such as compassion or concern—also influence wives' decisions to work.

Sociology of law views legal norms not merely as formal rules but as social instruments that interact with ethical standards, behavioral norms, and lived realities. Ontologically, sociology examines the essence of human life in society, emphasizing that individual behavior is shaped by social structures rather than purely personal desires. In this context, the role of

wives as breadwinners in Muncar Village reflects adaptive social behavior shaped by economic constraints, legal norms, and evolving family structures.

Discussion

Islamic Legal Analysis

From the perspective of Islamic law, the phenomenon of wives assuming the role of family breadwinners is permissible under certain conditions, particularly as long as the wife does not neglect her primary responsibilities within the household and continues to support her husband. In the case of Mrs. M, her engagement in paid work is carried out with the consent and support of her husband. Consequently, her employment is understood as a shared right and responsibility between husband and wife, grounded in mutual agreement and cooperation. Islam strongly encourages mutual assistance in goodness and piety, as stated in the Qur'an, Surah al-Mā'idah (5):2: "And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and transgression." This principle forms the ethical foundation for spousal cooperation in addressing economic challenges. One of the primary objectives (maqāṣid) and wisdoms of marriage is to regulate the relationship between men and women based on reciprocal rights, mutual assistance, and productive cooperation within an atmosphere of love and compassion.

In practical terms, supporting a husband who lacks stable income or earns insufficient wages does not merely take the form of material assistance. Providing emotional encouragement and motivation for the husband to seek lawful livelihood for the family is also regarded as an act of charity (ṣadaqah) on the part of the wife. Such actions reflect value-rational social action (wertrational), in which wives consciously orient their behavior toward absolute values such as family welfare, responsibility, and devotion. The wives involved acknowledge that their husbands' ability to provide financial support is uncertain due to illness, unemployment, or structural limitations, and they consciously accept this reality as part of their marital commitment.

The primary duty of a wife, therefore, is to preserve family unity to the best of her ability. In circumstances where the husband is unable to provide maintenance (nafkah), wives may work to fulfill basic household needs, viewing their contribution as voluntary charity rather than an imposed obligation. Islamic law permits such arrangements provided that the wife's domestic responsibilities and the rights of her husband and children are not neglected. In the case of Mrs. YH, whose husband is unable to earn sufficient income due to advanced age, Islamic jurisprudence considers the unpaid maintenance as a debt (dayn) owed by the

husband, to be fulfilled when he regains the ability to do so. If a husband is genuinely incapable of providing maintenance, a wife may choose either to exercise patience or to seek divorce (*fasakh*), subject to specific legal conditions. According to the majority of jurists, including the Hanbali school, a wife has the right to request dissolution of marriage if the husband is persistently unable to provide maintenance due to unemployment or incapacity.

Islamic scholars unanimously agree that a husband's obligation to provide maintenance remains valid even if he is ill or unemployed. In such cases, failure to fulfill this obligation constitutes injustice toward the wife, and the unpaid maintenance becomes a debt. Should the wife choose to assist her husband financially, such assistance is entirely voluntary and meritorious. When wives work to support the household, they are encouraged to do so with the intention of seeking divine reward and maintaining marital harmony (Suparjo & Ayudya, 2020). Islam allows women to work outside the home with the permission of their husbands, provided that their employment does not conflict with religious principles or compromise family welfare. There is no explicit prohibition in the Qur'an or Sunnah preventing wives from working to support their families. Nevertheless, Islam emphasizes that a wife must not neglect her natural and moral responsibilities in nurturing affection, compassion, and stability within the household. Classical fiqh literature consistently discusses maintenance (*nafkah*) in relation to marriage, as it arises from the marital contract (*'aqd al-nikāh*). According to Hasbi Ash-Shiddieqy, the standard of maintenance is determined by Islamic law while taking into account the husband's financial capacity. Maintenance includes both material needs (*nafkah ẓāhirah*)—such as food, clothing, housing, and household necessities—and non-material needs (*nafkah bātinah*), including emotional and marital fulfillment. Etymologically, *nafaqah* refers to the act of transferring wealth for the benefit of dependents. In the marital context, it signifies the husband's obligation to provide for his wife and children. Wahbah az-Zuhaylī, in *Fiqh al-Islām wa Adillatuhu*, affirms that maintenance encompasses food, clothing, housing, and, when required by local custom (*'urf*), domestic assistance (Husaini, Indah, Mawaddah, & Saputra, 2024). From the perspective of *al-maṣlaḥah*, however, the practice of wives becoming primary breadwinners may be categorized as *maṣlaḥah mulghāh* when it contradicts established Islamic legal principles regarding spousal roles (Sumarjoko, 2017).

Sociological Analysis

From a sociological perspective, this study draws primarily on conventional sociological theories due to limited specialized literature on Islamic sociology. Traditionally, women's participation in paid work was considered socially inappropriate, as wives were expected to remain at home and focus on domestic responsibilities. However, social change has

altered these norms, particularly in Muncar Village, where wives engage in paid employment due to factors such as husbands' illness, disability, or prolonged unemployment.

This phenomenon can be analyzed through the lens of instrumental rational action, defined as actions undertaken based on conscious calculation of goals and the means required to achieve them (Nasrullah, 2016). The wives interviewed were fully aware that financial provision is fundamentally the husband's responsibility, yet they recognized their husbands' inability to work due to illness or incapacity. Their decision to assume the breadwinning role was driven by clear objectives: sustaining family life, financing children's education, and ensuring basic survival. When viewed through social action theory, the wives' actions are also value-rational (wertrational), as they are guided by deeply held moral values such as responsibility, sacrifice, and preservation of family integrity. These actions align with the Qur'anic principle in Surah al-Nisā' (4):9, which emphasizes safeguarding future generations. Consequently, the practice of wives becoming family breadwinners may be regarded as socially and morally legitimate within specific contexts.

In many cases, wives' actions are also influenced by affective considerations, such as compassion and emotional attachment, rather than calculated planning. For instance, in the case of Mrs. M, whose husband is entirely unemployed, the wife continues to provide for the family despite personal hardship, prioritizing marital harmony and family stability over personal interest. Legally, the obligation of husbands to provide maintenance is clearly stipulated in both Islamic law and Indonesian positive law. Article 80 paragraph (4) of the Compilation of Islamic Law (KHI) states that, according to his financial capacity, a husband is responsible for providing maintenance, clothing, housing, healthcare, household expenses, and children's education. Nevertheless, the empirical realities in Muncar Village demonstrate how social and economic pressures necessitate adaptive family strategies that redefine traditional gender roles while striving to maintain religious and moral values.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing analysis, it can be concluded that the presence of wives as family breadwinners in Muncar Village, Gemawang District, Temanggung Regency is primarily influenced by internal household conditions. The empirical findings indicate that Mrs. M works as an agricultural laborer, Mrs. YH as a factory employee, Mrs. Y as a civil servant (Aparatur Sipil Negara), and Mrs. S as a domestic worker. Their involvement in income-generating activities is closely linked to the circumstances of their husbands, who are unemployed, suffer from prolonged illness, or lack stable employment, thereby rendering them unable to fulfill their financial obligations toward the family. From both sociological and Islamic legal

perspectives, the role of wives as breadwinners in this community represents a consequence of ongoing social change. Traditionally, women's participation in paid work outside the home was considered socially inappropriate, as wives were primarily expected to manage household affairs and care for children. However, shifts in economic and social conditions have compelled some wives to assume the breadwinning role in response to pressing family needs. Factors such as rising living expenses, children's educational costs, and other household necessities have significantly motivated wives to engage in paid work to ensure the economic sustainability of their families. This phenomenon reflects an unavoidable social reality within contemporary society.

From the perspective of Islamic law, wives who work to assist in meeting family needs are legally permitted to do so, provided that they do not neglect their primary responsibilities in managing household affairs and nurturing their children. Such participation in economic activities continues to position wives as integral and responsible actors in maintaining family welfare. This legal position does not contradict the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah and is consistent with the general principles outlined in the Compilation of Islamic Law.

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