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Contemporary feminism has served to fundamentally challenge the major assumptions of political theory and traditional definitions of what politics is. My answer will focus on feminist challenge derived from the critique of the theoretical difference liberals make between the public sphere in which the state can legitimately intervene and the private sphere where individuals are free from state interference. Initially, I shall focus on the reason why women are relegated to the private sphere. Further, I shall concentrate on the problems of the distinction itself. Before discussing the public-private dichotomy, I believe it is important to understand the construct of both sex and gender, as these definitions and subsequent implications is significant.

As Pateman observes, " Political constructs of what it means to be a man or woman are central to conceptions of the well-ordered polity," (Pateman, 1992, 19). There is an important distinction between sex and gender. Sex presumes a physical and biological difference, at the natural chromosome level. Gender, however, refers to dimensions built upon the biological, incorporating social, cultural and political distinctions. It is from this point where the sense of what is masculine and feminism is created. In feminist thought, I think an initial challenge has to be made to the definite male bias in views of human nature underpinning the public/private distinction.

In liberal theory, the qualities needed for public life and for justice are those qualities associated with the rational, impartial, independent autonomous individual, which a man is supposed to traditionally inhabit. Consequently, women being creatures of the body, emotion, particularity, care and nature are suited to the private sphere, according to liberal-patriarchy. Their role for

this has “ a foundation in nature,” (Kymlicka, 2002, 378). This is an essentially anthropological argument that links women and domestic life to symbolise nature. Feminists argued that the liberal view of human nature is based on a masculine construction of the self which sees each individual as separate and opposed to others.

The concepts and ideas it gives rise to are not gender neutral, but reflect male norms and values. They fail to capture what is distinctive about women’s experiences, behaviour, ways of thinking and reasoning. Surely, one should question what would happen if political theory was informed by the female qualities traditionally associated with women’s domestic and reproductive role. What would happen if female experiences of cooperation, care, nurturing, empathy, support, that is if feminist conceptions of the good, were applied to the public sphere? Thus, understanding the public-private distinction and how it has been manipulated to subject the position of women is imperative.

There are numerous flaws in the distinction and shows the interrelation of the public-private distinction and how it has been structured by liberal patriarchy. Women’s reproductive roles and domestic responsibilities affect their access to jobs and to participation in public life generally. Their paid employment and inequalities at work reflect and reinforce their subordinate position in the private domestic sphere. Typical women’s work is an extension of their domestic roles, and the low pay and low status attached to this work mirrors the devaluing of their domestic tasks, resulting also in

women's experience of the double-burden: that is, paid work during the day, and the vast majority of the household chores.

The exploitation of their labour in the paid work force and in the home are continuous with each other, two sides of their oppression. Women's low pay and marginalisation in the public world helps maintain women's economic dependence on men and enables men to dominate women sexually and exploit their domestic labour. Women in the home attend to men's domestic, sexual, emotional and material needs, and serve the interests of the capitalist economy by limiting competition for jobs and by socialising, reproducing and maintaining the workforce. The existing state may serve to attempt to improve the situation of women, however, this may only "disguise or legitimise their oppression," (Bryson, 1992, 195). Feminist critiques of the private/public dichotomy also show how these categories are inter-related in the sense that the private domestic sphere is structured by public and political factors.

The domestic is not the realm of freedom, but has constantly been subject to political regulation and interference. The state intervenes in the family by enforcing laws on and defining the rights, responsibilities and status of family members in relation to marriage, divorce, child support and child custody. It implements laws and policies on abortion, rape, childcare and the allocation of welfare. It propagates an ideology of the family. It is concerned with the decline and disintegration of the traditional family and it recommends a return to family values.

Feminists have shown not only how the private is constructed by the public through legislation on marriage, sexuality and the policies of the welfare state, but also that this construction both presupposes and reinforces the subordinate status of women and stereotypical views of their roles and responsibilities. As Bryson discovers, “welfare services may involve new forms of subordination rather than independence for women, while legislation to outlaw pornography may be used to censor lesbian literature or to outlaw sex education,” (Bryson, 1992, 195). The slogan “the personal is political” has roots in the feminist critique of the conventional public-domestic dichotomy, (Okin, 1991, 81). If the political is defined in terms of power, then power is not only manifest in the state, but it pervades every aspect of personal life.

Radical feminists claimed that the family is a central part of society’s power structure and the chief institution of patriarchy. Within the family women are exploited domestically, manipulated emotionally, coerced and abused sexually; there is an unequal distribution of domestic work, child-care, prestige and self-esteem. In these analyses the domestic, the personal and the sexual cannot be separated from the political. Feminists challenged the assumptions of traditional political theory, that the family, domestic and personal life was separate from social and political life and therefore non-political.

They claimed that the distinction enabled political theorists to neglect injustices in the private sphere and therefore to ignore a major part of the inequalities of gender. Radical feminists “argue that as the family was at the

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root of oppression, so it should be smashed,” (Okin, 1991, 83). The centrality of the family is crucial in all lines of argument. It is biology which subscribes for women bear children. There can be no disputing this point.

However, the patriarchal-liberal creation of the public-private dichotomy has served to utilise biology as a means to oppress women. Since a woman bears the child, it is assumed that she should rear it. As such, “ theorists silently assume female child rearing and domesticity are natural,” (Okin, 1991, 85), and further “ patriarchy rests on the appeal to nature and the claim that women’s natural function of child-bearing prescribes their domestic and subordinate place in the order of things,” (Pateman, 1989, 124). Ultimately, biological essentialism is the root of women’s subjugation, due to their being closer to nature. The bearing of children becomes interchangeable and necessary for the rearing of children. However, this is a fallacy.

In fact, “ Nature is the single cause of men’s domination,” (Pateman, 1989, 125). Thus, the public-private dichotomy stems from the sense that women are closest to nature, and therefore should be the child-rearer. In my perspective, I do believe that the gendered construction of men and women is centric in the public-private dichotomy. Whilst feminism over the past two centuries has recognised the subordination of women, it has not isolated that the construction of woman as the child-rearer is the core of the struggle. Undoubtedly, liberal philosophers ignore feminist critiques of the public/private distinction because they are not interested in questioning a division of labour from which they benefit.

It is evident to emphasise the need for a reconceptualisation of politics through a breakdown of the public-private dichotomy which relegates women to the 'non political' realm of the private sphere. When politics is understood to be much more than activities which take place in the formal, institutional sphere, women will take central stage as political actors, and gender construction may be exposed as that.