Redefining Public and Private in the Framework of a Gendered Equality

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"Public and private are imbedded within a dense web of associational meanings and intimations and linked to other basic notions: nature and culture, male and female... The content, meaning, and range of public and private vary with the exigencies of each society's existence and turn on whether the virtues of political life or the values of private life are rich and vital or have been drained, singly or together, of their normative significance."

The mantra of second wave feminism, "the personal is political," signifies the first attempt to break down the gendered division between the private sphere attributed to women and the public sphere of men. There is no clear origin of this public/private division; it could have been, as Germaine Greer humorously suggests, "while the male-hunter-gatherer strolled along burdened with no more that his spear and a throwing stick, his female mate trudged along after him carrying their infant, their shelter, their food supplies and her digging stick." It appears that, from the moment of human interaction and language, and its implicit category making of social divisions, women have always been associated with the private, and men with the public.

From the beginning of first wave feminism and the fight for women's suffrage, women have been using politics to enter the public realm of men, thus
challenging the stark division between public man and private woman. A goal of the feminist movement has been to create equality between the sexes, both in the public and private spheres of life. In doing so, the gendered spaces of men and women have become blurred and, because of the linkage between public/private and man/woman, respectively, the division between private and public has also become unclear.

The deconstruction of the public/private binary has several implications. It has politicized women's voices in a way that has disrupted the unity of women. Second, the concerns of private life are now exposed to the public, allowing for public and political influence on the private life, specifically in the form of legislation. Third, the deconstruction of the public/private threatens the individuality of experiences of women as women. Finally, it jeopardizes the sanctity of the private space. By looking at different models for gender equality within the private and public spaces we can begin to find a way in these spaces can be reconstructed to achieve a gendered equality while still preserving the public/private divide and the integrity and individuality of men and women.

As more women have entered the work force, and thus the public sphere, there has been an increasing focus on how this movement influences the idea of the traditional private life. Since the Industrial Revolution in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, men have been defined as the money-making workers and women as the child-bearing emotional support for men. In this traditional model "the ability of the unencumbered individual (man) to participate in the public sphere of work and politics assumes that someone, usually a woman, is preparing his food, cleaning his house, and raising the next generation of laborers through her reproductive labor." The expectation that child care will be done 'for free' by the mother in the home is connected to the lack of publicly funded day care that would enable women to work outside the home as well as the underpaid nature of child care labor. In the same vein, the devaluation of child care and the work of nurturing also serve to undervalue the work performed by women in the labor force. With women moving out of the house and into the labor market, the traditional model is challenged. To compensate for this, the division between private and public is being refined.
The shifting division between the public and private spheres results in an unclear distinction between the two, and the manner by which this division is refined is connected to the state. In the course of history, women's voices have been silenced in the public arena. This silencing is due significantly to that which defines them as women and to which they are inescapably linked: their sexuality, their natality, and their body. These three things helped situate women in the private realm. Linked with public/private is the political/apolitical dichotomy which closes women into an experience of the apolitical private, consequently overlooking women's distinctive experiences in politics. To combat this, women's voices have entered the political realm to protest for legislation that addresses the structural oppression they experience as women because of their association with the private. Women have been the primary proponents to the creation of better child care, better paid maternity and paternity leave, and equal pay in all occupational fields; all things that push the feminist agenda of equality for the sexes. Unfortunately, in politics, women's concerns and demands are regarded as reflections of moral or familial commitment, rather than an authentically political stance. Their issues are deemed "women's issues," thereby trivializing the issues. In doing so, these issues become "women's problems" and can be more easily bypassed by the male-dominated political system. In truth, however, these initiatives are to work to balance the public and private lives of everyone, so that the shift between private and public can be stabilized.

The politicization of women's voices has dual function. In part, it perpetuates the male/female dichotomy by creating gendered spaces within the public realm by creating "women's issues" as a political agenda, which rests outside mainstream (male) politics. At the same time, it causes women to adopt masculinized voices to be taken seriously within mainstream politics. In the discussing of politics, their female perspective cannot be brought into their argument, because if it is, the argument will be devalued. If their prospective is not female and is presented in the male dominated setting of politics, it is likely that they will present their ideas from a male perspective, so that the people who are being presented to (males) can identify with what the woman is saying.
The masculinization of women occurs in all public areas, including the work force. To be taken as serious workers, women must dress in a masculine manner, cannot mention the existence of their children and can never leave work to address familial responsibilities. This creates a double edge sword for working mothers; socioeconomic structures reinforce women’s primary responsibility for day care while gender-neutral family laws tend not to acknowledge the continuing nature of care giving. Women are increasingly expected to work what Arlie Hochschild has named "the second shift."

The division between the masculinized women's voices and the women's voices advocating for "women's issues" causes a rift between women that makes it harder for equality to be accomplished. When women adopt the masculinized manner in their public persona, they are working to uphold the gendered divisions of public and private. However, if they do not adopt a masculine style in the work force, it becomes increasingly difficult to succeed. Without success of women in the work force, women will remain contained in the private. On the other hand, if women's voices are divided along gender lines, there is no way to create a unitary women's voice to push for social and political changes that will create a gendered equality in the public and private spheres.

For a long time politics has rested in the public realm; the private realm was a place to escape from politics. Frances Olsen derives the connection: "Just as family was once seen as the repository for values being destroyed in the marketplace, the family may also be seen as the sanctuary of privacy into which one can retreat to avoid state regulation." So it follows that "the ideology of the public/private dichotomy allows government to clean its hands of any responsibility for the state of the 'private' world and depoliticizes the disadvantages which inevitably spill over the alleged divide by affecting the positions of the 'privately' disadvantaged in the 'public' world."

Taken together, the family is viewed as a 'haven in a heartless world' that should be protected from the scrutiny by the state and law. These societal ideas, based on the binary public/private division, make it difficult to argue for legislation of things that appear to be in the private realm.
It is slowly being recognized that the public and private are not in opposition to one another, but are in reciprocal connection with one another. There have been political efforts, through legislation, to rectify the gender differences of the public sphere. Major initiatives have been taken to rid law and social policy of assumptions based on stereotypical images of women as economically dependent wives and mothers. Paternal leave and other legal policy changes are in place to encourage men to participate in the parenting of children. Despite the efforts to ensure equality for women, promoting the sharing of familial responsibilities by women and men, and enhancing women's position in the labor force, gender inequalities still persist.

One piece of legislation that is highly contended, and has great influence on the public/private debate, is that of legal abortions. The topic of abortion approaches the public/private division and deconstruction in two ways. First, it approaches the public/private debate socially, looking at its influence on the public man/private woman dichotomy and its influence on the oppression and autonomy of women within the public sphere. Second, it speaks to the political and legislative division of what is considered public and private territory, and the extent to which legislation can regulate the private.

Abortion, as it is situated in society today, acts both as a tool of liberation and of oppression for women. Without the right to choose whether or not to have an abortion, women would be forced into the private domain as mothers, unable to enter the public realm and gain equality with men. On the other hand, the right to abortion serves to bypass the greater issues of female oppression intrinsic in the male-dominated public sphere, such as the lack of support for women as mothers within our society.

Abortion is integral to a women's right to sovereignty. It derives from the equality doctrine that, at its core, requires people be treated with equal respect, and from that should be equally treated and cared for by society. If forced into pregnancy because the lack of safe, legal abortions, women would be denied access to the benefits provided to those in the public realm. Once a woman becomes a mother, her resources to education, employment, and health care become severely limited. Compulsory pregnancy laws violate the traditional
American ideals of individual rights and freedoms. Without the right to abortion, women's access to the public would be restricted.

Conversely, abortion also acts as a mechanism used by patriarchal culture to keep women in submission by not adapting its structure to encompass mothers. With abortion, women's equality is still based in a male-dominated public sphere whose legislation favors men and discriminates against mothers. To be on an equal level politically, socially and economically, women cannot become pregnant. Women must adopt the characteristics of men in order to be equal.

Despite the contradictory affects of the position of women within the public/private debate over abortion, the idea of equality insists that women be allowed to choose to have abortions because of women's position in society and the roles and responsibilities of women in society in relation to others. Abortion is necessary to aid in the movement of women from the submissive private life to gain control offered by the public life. With autonomous power, women then might be able to begin to change the structures of the public and private to encompass gender equality.

The right to abortion is deeply situated in discussion over public legislative jurisdiction over the private actions. As discussed earlier, women's lives and women's issues have tended to be relegated to a separate, private sphere that is considered immune from regulation. The private realm is described as a 'haven' from the injustices of the public realm. Privacy is viewed as a fundamental right and "can be interpreted as being involved in a range of constitutional and moral issues – freedom from surveillance and searches, reproductive freedom, freedom to associate, confidentiality of communications, and family values." To many people, though, the private sphere is not necessarily a safe haven. It is a place that can harbor physical and emotional abuse, and without regulation of these things, the injustice in the private sphere could go on to hurt many. In accordance, the privacy of home could be utilized to mask the production of drugs, bombs, and so on that may threaten the well being of other humans.
The regulation of things within the private realm is precarious, because "by its very terminology – privacy – the doctrine suggests at its core that it is plausible to divide the world into two spheres: the public and the private. The presupposition is that privacy should be protected because private acts do not affect public life." On the contrary, the public and private are deeply interconnected spheres and do affect one another greatly. Some privacy must be forfeited to gain protection from potential harm that may occur in the private sphere. There must be laws intact to deal with the consequences of harm that take place in private.

In Row v. Wade the Supreme Court found that the right of privacy "was enough to encompass a woman's decision whether or not to terminate her pregnancy," creating a precarious position for abortion in relation to privacy. It deals with the existence of two bodies in one, and the choice to undergo abortion influences the well-being of both. In the cut and dry definition above, privacy should be regulated when it comes to affecting the public sphere. The decision that women make about how to use their reproductive capacities profoundly affect our society, and the decisions that the state makes with regard to reproductive health policies profoundly affect the lives of women. Abortion, therefore, is not solely in the private realm. However, with that argument and the control over a woman's own body can be from the public realm, it becomes quite difficult to define the limits of public control over the private domain.

Abortion is only one of the many pieces of legislature that aids in distorting the division between private and public. While there have been many positive advances through legislature and social change for the equality of women created by their entrance into the public realm, there are also some disadvantages. Women have had to sacrifice their womanhood and adopt a masculine attitude to succeed in the work environment. In the deconstruction of the public/private division, the individuality of the experiences of women as women is threatened.

In Three Guineas, Virginia Woolf addressed unique experiences of women that are lost when women join the causes of man. Woolf sees the division of man and women not along the lines of public and private spheres, but as members
to two different societies. Unlike most feminist ideas of integration of men and women within the public sphere, Woolf argues for the creation of a separate society for women that works in conjunction with but separately from the society that has previously been created by men. She reasons

"...it seems both wrong for us rationally and impossible for us emotionally to fill up your form and join your society. For by doing so we should merge our identity with yours; follow and repeat and score still deeper the old warn ruts in which society, like a gramophone whose needle is stuck, [that] is grinding out with intolerable unanimity..."

By joining the male society, Woolf predicts that the presence of women would not act to transform it to encompass women, but instead merge their identity with it and lose their individuality. This, in fact, is what we have seen happen. Women are losing their feminine characteristics and adopting masculine ones to be successful in society, in turn losing their individuality as women.

Woolf writes about the creation of an "Outsiders' Society." This name "has the advantage that it squares with the facts – the facts of history, of law, of biography; even, it may be, with the hidden facts of our still unknown psychology," which support the devaluation and exploitation women. There are few good reasons for women to try to join a society which has consistently ignored them. In the sixty-six years since Three Guineas was published, very little has changed. On a whole, women have been subjugated by men in society. Women have been forced, through social structures and attitudes, to remain in the private. When they have entered the public sphere, it is under men's direction and jurisdiction, forcing women to lose their femininity and replace it with masculinity. To keep the individualized experiences of women, women today must form a separate society similar to Woolf's "Outsider's Society." This society could essentially push for the equality of women within the public sphere, a sphere that encompasses both the societies of men and women, while maintaining the individualized experiences of women.

The deconstruction of the public/private divide is not only causing the loss of the individuality and uniqueness of the female experience, but it is also threatening
the sanctity of the private space. The private space is being destroyed because of its intrinsic association with the oppression of females, but as it is being destroyed, the benefits of private space are also being ruined. Both the public and private realms have morally associated characteristics with them. The public moral evaluation – duty, justice, right, equality, liberty, legitimacy, resistance – is counterbalanced by the private moral sentiment and emotion – affection, responsibility, love, mercy, compassion, decency, kindness.

Associated with the private sphere is intimacy; with the public sphere is detachment and coldness. The private sphere is a place that a person can escape from the impersonal public sphere. Privacy "allows us to do things we would not do in public, to experiment, to engage in self-reflection; it protects us from majoritarian pressures; it allows us to control who we will have access to ourselves and to information about ourselves, and to make decisions that critically affect our lives." It is not intended to secure separation from social pressure, but to assist social involvements and intimacy.

As the line between private and public dissolves, the private haven that procures love, trust and compassion does so as well. It must be addressed that the private does not necessarily provide this haven; for some the private harbors fear of the injustices that can be committed under the radar of the system. However, if the private is fully abolished, the autonomy of individuals will be lost. Privacy is a way of affirming the "centrality of uncoerced individual decision-making in important areas of human activity." If the private space is completely lost in this blurring between public and private, the sacredness of our sovereignty as individuals will be lost along with it.

Thus far, two models have been presented for the way to regulate the public/private divide. The first model is the model that is the model that is currently being enacted in modern day American society. In this model, women are thrusting themselves into the public sphere and are determined to gain equality. Unfortunately, this approach is haphazard and separated, with some women adopting masculine characteristics to succeed while others are struggling to succeed while maintaining their femininity.
Woolf's "Outsider's Society" is the second of these two models. In this version of approaching the public/private debate, Woolf suggests creating a separate society for women; a society that exists both in the public and private realms but exists separately from the society of men. Since "Outsider's Society" will be comprised solely of women, it can respond to the needs and individualities of women, preserving their uniqueness.

Neither of these two models truly encompasses one of the major goals of contemporary feminism: to create a gendered equality both in the private and public. This equality is an equality that encompasses the individualities of all genders instead of forcing all genders to adopt the stereotypical characteristics of men to succeed in the public, or the stereotypical characteristics of women to do the work of the private. The achievement of this equality is not just to create equality within the public sphere of work and politics, but to engage people of all genders in every aspect of life. Working towards gendered equality will facilitate in the de-gendering of the areas of public and private without collapsing the divide.

To begin to achieve this goal of gendered equality, there is "a call for retaining but recasting the public and private boundaries as part of an effort to preserve each yet reach towards an ideal of social reconstruction." By taking part of Woolf's argument and looking outside the dominant society, not within, can justice and equality and liberty for all men and women begin to be achieved. In order to reconstruct the public/private in a gendered equality, first a deconstruction the market/family and state/family aspects of the public/private must take place. This does not mean that there is a need to destroy the line between the public and private totally, but the need to redefine this line in a background of equality.

The reconstruction of the public/private divide along the lines of gendered equality is an undeniably prodigious ambition, but having a final aspiration and ideal will aid in directing the change that is needed. This change must not be forced in the form of legislation, though legislation does help in shaping social attitudes, but must be completely embodied by individuals to facilitate in the social change needed to achieve gendered equality. Slowly, through small
refinements of the public and private, this gendered equality will hopefully become an effective reality.

Bibliography


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