

Gender Discrimination in Politics: A Critical Review of Liberalism

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ABSTRACT

Liberal political theory assumes that the separation of the public from the private sphere is natural and therefore woman's subordination to man is inherent. The backdrop of this dichotomy appears to reinforce gender stereotyping since it constructs woman to reflect an apolitical nature of a subject in a political system. Man's behaviour, on the other hand, is portrayed as the standard political behaviour against which a woman is supposed to measure. Viewed from the perspective of the dichotomy, politics is reduced to "man" and hence its masculinisation. Camouflaging its exclusionary tendencies, liberal theory purports to employ "universal"- neutral static language which is "sexual-blind" such as "individual", "citizen", "worker", "equality", and "representation". Liberalism therefore makes universal rationality the essence of humanity and the basis of its epistemology and politics. This article examines the core of liberalism as one of the sources of gender discrimination in politics.

Keywords: Liberalism, gender, discrimination, politics, masculinization, rationality

INTRODUCTION

Political theories are not neutral and natural. They were formulated to reflect the socio-economic and political context of a given space and time. The theories are therefore infused with the experiences, perspectives, understandings and assumptions of their creators about human nature and relationships. By the same token, the language that is imbedded within the body of these theories reflects the context within which they originate. In the Western and colonial societies, for example, the creators of the language, norms, laws, and practices of the dominant culture and ideology were white, economically privileged, formally educated, able-bodied, heterosexual (or at least not openly homosexual or bisexual) men. Men

with power created the dominant cultural discourses - languages, symbols, disciplines and institutions that control political, legal, economic, social, scientific and organizational practices governing a gendered society (Bender 1990). Arguably, women were inevitably excluded from the studies designed to produce knowledge of the dominant discourses, theories and practices. It is through this exclusionary process that the language of political theories carries with it the fallacy of gender stereotyping by constructing woman as apolitical subject of the political system. In this article, the liberal philosophy and theories are critically examined. Toward that grand objective, the public/private paradigm and its underpinning social contract (consent) theory form the core of this discussion. The intention is to revisit and destabilize the fallacy of gender stereotyping as imbedded in the language of political theory. The main argument of this article is that political theories and classical studies have been at the centre stage of perpetuating gender stereotyping with the effects of rendering women incompetent political beings and hence their exclusion from participating in political affairs.

METHODOLOGY

This is a literature review-based article. It employs mainly secondary materials particularly classical and contemporary works on liberalism. The materials are critically reviewed using three thematic areas namely gender stereotyping, rationality, and universality. The purpose is to delineate exclusionary tendencies of liberalism based on gender. This approach is useful in so far as it interrogates the controversial facets of liberalism on its inclusivity and exclusivity along a gendered perspective.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Gender Stereotyping in Politics

Theorizing politics is a discourse which has yet to be closed. With the publication of the Aristotle's *The Politics*, in which various constitutions are studied to establish the best method of a government, the debate on what constitutes "the political" began. The central questions in the discourse revolve around two definitional issues: the scope and nature of politics as well as who should participate in politics and why. In examining this discourse, two frames of references are considered here for the sake of space. The first frame is called institutionalist perspective. This views politics as confined to the state and its related institutions.

Politics, in this sense, comprises of public and formal affairs of the government.

Putting this point in perspective, Nnoli (1986) posits that an action of the bishop can be differentiated from that by a president in that the president's order is authoritative since it has the back-up of the sanctioning power of the state. With coercive forces such as police, army, prison and courts, the president is fully vested with powers that can be used to implement his or her decisions. In contrast, the bishop, without these supportive instruments is unable to effectively sanction his or her followers. This view seems to carry the problem of academic reductionism. For one thing, if the same activities, such as elections, conflicts, and decision-making take place within the church, schools, trade unions and so forth, can't one argue that these are church politics, school politics, union politics respectively? To define politics strictly around the affairs of the state is to fail to appreciate other spaces and forms of politics. This view restricts the meaning of politics to the old fashion of the Westphalia Treaty of 1648 that recognised state as a sovereign entity with the right to exercise power in a hierarchical order. In contrast, the instrumentalist perspective views politics as an exercise of power game. It is argued that when "X" influences "Y" so that the latter accomplishes the wishes of the former which without that influence nothing would have happened, power is assumed to have been exercised (French and Raven, 1959).

This definition is broader in the sense that it views power to transcend the state to other non-state actors. It allows one to appreciate politics at both micro and macro level organisations. One omission in this definition is that it does not state who should own and exercise that power against who. It also assumes that power is static and exercised in one direction. Power, in this way, seems to be a means to an end an end in itself. To put it differently, power as we shall see later, is seen to be confined to the public sphere, the sphere of man. If that is the correct interpretation as given by the public/private paradigm, one is supposed to see power flowing from men to women in their private sphere. In a way, men are the ones who possess power and exercise the same over women. From these derivations, politics is inherently infused with patriarchal assumptions of power that control knowledge – reasoning and rationality. In the Estonian System theory, political system is arranged in terms of 'demand-political system-supply' logic (Easton, 1965). It assumes that the system operates in response to the demands from the environment i.e., citizens. These

should have the capacity to demand from the state: activities and services since the government through a social contract (formed during election) promised to deliver them in exchange for votes and support, mainly through compulsory taxation. To be sure, politics being a formal activity in the public sphere automatically excludes women to play their role. Thus, one may put that the premise on which politics and its discipline – political science is founded, is essentially a male domain. And therefore, all theories, research and studies derived from politics are biased to favour men. Pateman (1989) aptly argues that the power of men over women “is excluded from scrutiny and deemed irrelevant to political life and democracy by the patriarchal construction of the categories within which political theorists work”.

Attesting to this view Lovenduski (1981) posits that the dominant conception of political studies excludes women “largely because women usually do not dispose of public power, belong to political elites or hold influential positions in government institutions”. As it can be deduced from these authors, Pateman primarily criticises the institutional focus of liberal political theory while Lovenduski questions the instrumentalist view of positivist political science. Indeed, both the institutional and instrumental conceptions of politics focus on the public sphere of decision making. It is from this backdrop that Pateman (1989) proceeds to claim, “both women’s exclusion from the public world and the manner of our inclusion have escaped from the notice of political theory”. The instrumental and institutional views of politics are criticised to be restrictive and biased. The feminist assertion that “the personal is political” destabilized the previous definitions of politics. Phillips (1998) went further to say that “politics” was subjected to such devastating criticism that it threatened to dissolve as a distinct category of analysis. From the above observations, it can be noted that the definition of politics is intertwined with gender stereotyping. In that sense, the relationships between men and women are shaped by using “constructs” which mask world’s reality about the nature of man and woman (Archer and Lloyd, 2002). From the work of social psychologists, a stereotype is employed to connote a set of beliefs typical to personal attributes of a group of people. Koch (2000) argues that, though “stereotype” was once considered a pejorative term, the cognitive approach in social psychology now regards it in a more neutral manner, viewing it as a heuristic employed to decide whether a target possesses a particular attribute.

Thus, gender stereotypes are mere social and cultural constructs. They are essentially rooted in the historically socialized roles that have encompassed the lives of men and women. To that extent, they constitute beliefs people hold about members of the categories man and woman. Existing in a bipolar axis, these stereotypes provide mainly three assumptions: that women and men are fundamentally different; that men are superior to women and that men are logical and rational, the attributes which women seem to lack. From the outset, stereotypes are basically of two types. The first type is named belief stereotypes. These refer to the ideologies and policy preferences that are ascribed to men and women, and the second one is called trait stereotypes which concern with personal qualities that are inferred about men and women (Fox and Oxley, 2003). In line with this view, Archer and Lloyd (2002) for example point out that in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, God created woman as the helpmate of man but not his equal. This divine view seems to take woman's subordination to man as the natural order of the day. It is not uncommon to find that in most teachings of other major religions, woman occupies this inferior status. Sabbah (1984) puts that, "Muslim culture has built-in ideological blindness to economic dimension of women, who are ordinarily perceived, conceived and defined as exclusively sexual objects." One peculiar element about stereotype is generalization. Women are clustered and lumped together as if they form a homogeneous social category. Almond and Verba (1963) study on civic competence is exemplary to bring this point home.

In this study, women are generalized as incompetent political beings. They dislike politics and would not participate in that game. Meena (2001) seems to concur with Almond and Verba when she observed those people who never follow politics in Tanzania to be women who accounted for 61 percent against men who comprised 39 percent. The simple reason advanced for this difference is that most women live in rural areas and particularly those who did not attend the formal schooling. One of the omissions in Meena's analysis is to fail to question the nature of that education. If the theories, discourses, as well as practices of education are infused with gender stereotyping, it is no wonder that such education will perpetuate the gender gap between men and women. In this context, education is in itself insufficient to correct the past gender imbalances.

Rationality in Liberalism

The emergence of liberal political theory is associated with the rise of capitalism in Western Europe around 17th Century. The theory is essentially grounded on the conception of human beings as rational agents. Rationality has three distinct elements: firstly, the mental capacity; secondly, as a property of individuals rather than of groups; and thirdly, as a capacity that is possessed in approximately equal measure at least by all men (Jaggar, 1983). Like any other political theory, in developing its vision of the good society, liberal political theory incorporates some assumptions about the nature of men and women. To be sure, the liberal conception of the good society naturally is the one that advocates the basic liberal values of protecting the dignity of each individual and promote individual autonomy and self-fulfilment. This means that individuals should enjoy maximum freedom that is not impeded by others. Paradoxically, impediment is a likely permanent human condition.

Liberal theorists therefore devise a state as a social institution that will protect each individual's right to a fair maximum autonomy and self-fulfilment. They are however, very cautious of the potential dangers of a state to abuse its role as a custodian of protection of liberty. Hence, they limit the legitimate state intervention in the life of individuals. This limitation resulted into what is commonly referred to as the public and private spheres. The public/private paradigm contends that society is broadly divided into two spheres i.e. the public and private spheres. The public sphere according to this paradigm is characterized by power, wealth, rule, rationality, career and reasoning. In contrast, the private sphere is predominated by domestic activities as well as child bearing (Arneil, 2001). It should be noted right from the outset that, political theory and the classical studies are accused to have a share in reinforcing and widening this dichotomy. They construct woman to reflect the apolitical nature of a subject in a political system. Man's behaviour, on the other hand, is always taken as the standard political behaviour against which a woman is supposed to measure herself. The dichotomy thus reduces politics to "man". By so doing, politics is being masculinised. Nikolas (1987) reaffirms this view in a more explicit way:

The division between public and private is traced back in political and social philosophy at least as far as Aristotle's distinction between polis and oikos and up to the natural rights theories of John Locke. However, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

the distinction is reposed in terms of the division between home and market. It is given a philosophical foundation in the liberal political philosophy of J. S. Mill and his followers, with the opposition between the realm of legitimate public regulation and the realm of freedom from intrusion, personal autonomy and private choice. Writers point to the particular associations in these texts between the public sphere - the world of work, the market, individualism, competition, politics and the state - and men, and the corollary association of women with the private, domestic, intimate, altruistic and humanitarian world of the home.

Stevens claims that, “The traditional division confined women largely to the domestic sphere and to the reproduction and nurture of children as their primary role, while generally affording a much greater share of both power and resources to men. However, this division is being undermined...In particular, modern market-driven capitalism tends to treat everyone alike, whether as a factor of production (a worker) or a consumer” (Stevens, 2007). This position asserts that capitalism is fair to everyone, something which is not true. It ignores critical questions like ownership of the major means of production and factors of production. Gatens (1992) posits that “Liberal feminists conceive the problem of women’s confinement to the private sphere as central to their low socio-political status. Equality, wealth and opportunity are located in the public sphere. Hence the issue of providing women with access to power becomes the issue of providing them with equal access to the public sphere. The state is obliged to provide women with the same opportunities it provides for men.” Nonetheless, the question as to what constitutes a state is side skipped. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792)*, Mary Wollstonecraft argued forcefully that women had the potential of full rationality and as a result were as capable as men of complete moral responsibility. She specifically argued that:

Men and women must be educated, in great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society that they live in. In every age there has been a stream of popular opinion that has all carried before it, and given a family character, as it were, to the century. It may then fairly be inferred, that, till society be differently constituted, much cannot be expected from education. It is, however, sufficient for my present purpose to assert, that, whatever effect circumstances have on the abilities, every being may become virtuous by the exercise of its own reason; for if but

one being was created with vicious inclinations, that is positively bad, what can save us from atheism? Or if we worship a God, is not that God a devil?

The above quotation is instructive to the solution of women's invisibility in the private sphere. It shows that the problem lays in the whole issue of "rationality" which seems to be deficient in women. Mary thinks that education is the only way to strengthen women. In his *The Subjection of Man* (1869), John Stuart Mill dismisses the natural difference on rationality between men and women. He contends that if men had ever been found in a society without women, or women without men, or if there had been a society of men and women in which the women were not under the control of men, something might have been positively known about the mental and moral differences which may be inherent in the nature of each. And therefore, what is now called as the nature of women is eminently artificial thing – the result of forced oppression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others. Mill's view sharply contradicts John Locke's social contract theory that the separation between the public and private spheres is natural and therefore for woman to be subordinate to man is inherent. In the *Sexual Contract*, Pateman (1988) vehemently criticizes the "social contract theory" and reduces it to "sexual contract":

The logic of contract as exhibited in 'surrogate' motherhood shows very starkly how the extension of the standing on 'individual' to women can reinforce and transform patriarchy as well as challenge patriarchal institutions. To extend to women the masculine conception of the individual as owner, and the conception of freedom as the capacity to do what you will with your own, is to sweep away any intrinsic relation between the female and owner, her body and reproductive capacities. She stands to her property in exactly the same external relation as the male owner stands to his labour power or sperm; there is nothing distinctive about womanhood.

The point to be noted here is that sex matters and there is no legitimate way to avoid referring to it. The social contract theorists want us to believe that such contract is entered between and among individuals. It is the contract of freedom and is done under individuals' consent. Pateman claims that to view a contract in that perspective is to ignore the existence of both sexes in bodily form. And therefore, one is able to advance

women's interests if and only if he or she first and foremost appreciates the sexual differences.

The Pretence of Universality

The first pillar of pretence is citizenship. Citizenship is a precondition to participate in public politics (Stevens, 2007). Being a citizen means having formal civil and political rights. As we argued elsewhere in this article, citizenship is inextricably tied to the public as opposed to the private sphere. Here the public comprises of both the state and civil society and the private is defined institutionally as the relations and activities of domestic life (Squires, 1999). It was John Locke who proposed the relation between men and women along the public and private spheres. According to him, the state of nature forced individuals to fear death and therefore the need to form a social contract.

That means a contract that is based on consent, and the one that would protect all against all. Interestingly, Locke's state of nature shows that prior to the consent men were already dominant in their families. He argued that a wife's subjection to her husband had a foundation in nature. This implies that women were excluded from the status of being "individual" which is basic to consent theory. The argument which is always advanced by feminists is that if a wife's subjection to her husband has a "natural" foundation, she cannot at the same time be "naturally" free and equal individual. This means that citizenship is a natural property of man in his public sphere. Supporting this view, Pateman (1989) argues that "citizenship has been made in the male image". The artificial inclusion of women as citizen works differently from the original inclusion of men. Pateman (1980) furthers that:

Consent is central to liberal democracy, because it is essential to maintain individual freedom and equality; but it is a problem for liberal democracy, because individual freedom and equality is also a pre-condition for the practice of consent. The identification of enforced submission with consent in rape is a stark example of the wider failure in liberal democratic theory and practice to distinguish free commitment and agreement by equals from domination, subordination, and inequality.

The above quotation suggests that citizenship is an ideological euphemism of liberalism founded on a false consent. Using that “consent” men are able to enjoy freedom and equality while women are subjected to men’s domination. And therefore, men are considered to be citizens, the fact which allows them to participate fully in politics. The second pillar of pretence is equality. This means, treating all human beings equally. In *the Subjection of Woman*, Mills advocated “a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other” (Mill, 1985). But it has to be stated that equality in liberalism is equality of opportunity as opposed to outcome. As Stevens (2007) maintains, “women’s access to full social citizenship requires formal equality of opportunity on a basis of equal treatment”.

The author fails to state clearly how that state of affairs can be achieved. To be emphasized here, though in risk of repetition, is that the development of capitalism was the driving force in separating the public from the private sphere. In a way, it was capitalism which accorded men a sense of citizenship and the associated bourgeois rights in their public sphere. Paradoxically, liberalism does not seek fundamental changes of the system to ensure equal treatment instead it advocates for equal opportunity without dismantling the unequal system of capitalism. Einhorn (2005) thus argues that “The neo-liberal market paradigm empowers the male economic actor as the citizen with the capacity to exchange contracts in the market-place. Without social entitlements, for example to adequate and affordable childcare, in a context where women are still seen as primarily responsible for looking after children, they do not have an equal capacity to access the public spheres of either the market or the polity”. Stevens (2007) posits that women’s economic position, status and power in the societies of OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries at the start of twenty-first century fail to measure up to that of men. This observation is instructive insofar as it places men to be the standard measure of women demands to access the public sphere and equality. This shortly suggests women should be like men, or pretend to be so.

Phillips (1992) submits that “the male body has been the reference point in all our phallographic discourse, and discussions of even sexual equality continue to privilege his body. Women can say they want to be treated the same – but this means being treated as if they were men; or they can demand laws that are specific to their needs- but this means being

compensated for their lesser abilities or role”. It is along this line of reasoning, Gatens (1992) argues that equality in this context can involve only the abstract opportunity to become equal to men. It is the male body, and its historical and culturally determined powers and capacities, that is taken as the norm or the standard of the liberal “individual” or citizen. The third pillar of pretence is representation. Historically women have been excluded from participation in the formal institutions of politics. As we argued elsewhere, the reason to this phenomenon is found in the artificial separation between the public and private spheres which denies women to be citizen. Stevens (2007) puts:

Men in western societies acquired a substantial body of civil rights- rights to justice and to own property- before the achievement of political rights. The right of all men to participate fully in the political life of the state, an aspiration of the revolutionaries of the late eighteen century, was acquired only gradually as autocratic and absolute rule was replaced by liberal democratic systems. However, for women the position has largely been reversed. Civil as well as political rights have had to be fought for and the acquisition of political rights has often been seen not only as an end in itself but an essential means of securing equality in other spheres of rights.

Women are under-represented in the formal institutions of political and economic life. According to IPU (2019) the worldwide average women representation in the parliaments is only 24%. One of the simple advanced reason is that women are less interested in politics than men. In Great Britain, for example, the government’s Central Statistical Office report on women states that “women are not particularly interested in politics” (Stephenson quoted in Squires, 1999).

This position was supported by a government survey which showed that only 7 per cent of women claimed to be “very interested” in politics, and a MORI poll to accompany the 75th anniversary of women’s rights showed that 76 per cent of women were not involved in any form of party-political activity (Squires *ibid.*: 196). If representation connotes representation of interests, beliefs, constituencies and identities, how are women included in the formal politics? If male dominates the public sphere how can they really represent women? Through the mythology of the “affirmative action” women continue to suffer male domination. The centrality of that action is to effect inclusion of the marginalised groups

into the major decision-making organs, employment, and education. Brest and Oshige (1995) define an affirmative action as a program initiated to seek remedy of the significant underrepresentation of members of certain racial, ethnic or other groups through measures that take group membership or identity into account. This definition emphasizes on two things. The first one is the question to cure exclusion by inclusion and the second is the issue of who should benefit out of the program, which is the group that has suffered exclusion and not the third party or an individual member. However, critics of affirmative action pose one fundamental question: Is affirmative action inherently preferential, discriminatory, and thus inconsistent with the constitution's guarantee of equal protection? (Collier, 1995). Collier responds this question in affirmative. Consistent with this view, Farber (1994) sees affirmative action as the reverse discrimination.

To them if the constitution stipulates the equality of opportunity and avoids in any way to mention any sort of discrimination, that alone is sufficient to protect every individual. Writing on the American political system, Jeffrey (1997) puts that "No matter how hard politicians run from it, this issue is not going away. The Declaration of Independence, for example, does not say that because of past discrimination some are more equal than others. It does not say that for some pursuit of happiness needs to be constrained because of past privileges; no, it insists, boldly, that here in America, we are all equal under the law". While this argument is convincing, it is narrow and too legalistic. For one thing, it misses out to raise important questions like who enacted that Declaration and for whose interests. It is ridiculous to argue emphatically that all people are equal before the law without looking deeper into those laws themselves. One may raise questions, for example, were women in the process of enacting that Declaration? How are their concerns taken into account? The fact that women in America won the voting franchise around 1920s raises doubt on the fairness of the laws themselves. Writing on the parliaments of the advanced industrial democracies, Caul (1999) argues that women participate little in the national decision-making process which not only limits diversity but also contradicts one of the central tenets of representative democracy. It is along this line of reasoning that Brown (2001) submits that, "No process could adequately address gender interests without taking into account female representation within formal political institutions. Higher levels of women's representation can empower women as a result of both the creation of more equitable

opportunities for women to participate in politics and the greater concern with gender interests that female policy-makers are supposed to have”.

The fourth pillar of pretence is the use of gender-neutral language. Liberalism always strives to avoid any mention of sex. It, therefore, makes use of “universal”, neutral and static terms such as “individuals”, “citizen”, and “worker”. But this “gender-neutral abstraction” camouflage the male dominance. Phillips (1992) argues that “Human identity is sexually differentiated, and exists in a bodily form. Those who seek to deny the body, who deal only in the abstraction of ‘the individual’ or ‘the citizen’, who think it should not make any difference whether these individuals are women or men, will be writing in one sex alone as their standard. Women can be encompassed on an equality with men only if sexual difference is first of all acknowledged”. While I share Phillips’ language argument, I do not agree on the fact that women will attain equality once they become like men. It should be acknowledged that language is a product of society and it must carry with it the culture, norms, and practices of time and space. Swila (2004) submits that:

Language is a product of social conventions in that linguistic structures, their meanings and uses are shared by the entire community; the individual’s freedom in her or his linguistic choices only has meaning within these conventions. Language is a crucial aspect of culture: it expresses cultural values and preoccupations and transmits these new generations. Gendered relations found in other social aspects are necessarily present and enacted in language as well. Therefore, by examining language, we are able to reconstitute the values and beliefs of a community through time. Language is dynamic and evolves to reflect changes in the society it serves; if more positive and equal gender relations are created, they will be reflected in language.

The above quoted paragraph shows clearly that language is not neutral. In political studies, the field of international relations is for example perceived to be a man’s game. With very few exceptions, men are the government leaders, diplomats, and high-ranking international military and civil servants. Ferris (2004) maintains that sexual language is used to mobilize male soldiers, foster their camaraderie, and inspire them to assert their masculinity. She observes that US and allied pilots in the Gulf War were shown pornographic films as part of their pre-aid preparations.

CONCLUSION

This article notes that the language of political theory is infused with gender stereotyping. Supported by capitalism and the consent theory, liberalism locates women in the private sphere. In masking its exclusion tendencies, liberalism purports to employ neutral vocabularies such as “citizen”, “individual”, “worker”, “representation”, “equality”, and “freedom.” Macdonell (1986) submits that liberalism subscribes to the idea of individuality and sameness. That is, on the one hand, we are all free to do what we please; and, on the other hand, we all speak the same language, hold the same values and know the same truths unless, that is, we are aberrant and abnormal. This is indeed fallacious. Young (1997) argues that the paradox of individualism and sameness underlies liberalism’s notion that there exists a universal standard of rationality that forms the core essence common to all “normal” people. Those who act against such standard do so because they are in the first-place irrational in their lives. And therefore, liberalism makes this notion of universal rationality as the essence of humanity, the basis of its epistemology and politics, which valorise rational objectivity and its supported embodiment of scientific inquiry and institutions of government.

To de-construct the political theory and the task of engendering is still a challenge amid centuries of women’s movements. One is either to look for theories of identity and subjectivity that will find women’s vocabulary in the contemporary political theory. This would mean reversing the situation by seeking women’s domination. Secondly, is to reconstruct the theories to be neutral and this entails confirming the status quo. Finally, is to seek rights as men are treated which would imply that the male political behaviour is the standard and desirable one for women to aspire. The current choice is to unpack the language of political theories so as to iron out gender bias. In liberal societies, this should see the fundamental change of the capitalist system which supports the public/private dichotomy and its associated consequences.

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