

Women's Citizenship in Contemporary Liberal Society and the Degradation of Single Mothers on Welfare

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Abstract

This paper explores issues of women's citizenship and, in particular, the relationship between motherhood and citizenship. I draw upon the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft and Carole Pateman to inform my argument that maternal duties are not valued by liberal society because they are not recognized as a public benefit and they take place in the home rather than the work-force. I also examine the social alienation of single mothers on welfare to determine how poverty, social prejudice, and a systemic lack of recognition affect their sense of citizenship. I conclude that the division between the public and private spheres of society must be broken down to facilitate a change in attitude toward women's citizenship so that motherhood can be formally and publicly recognized as a valuable civil duty.

Résumé

Cet article examine la citoyenneté des femmes, en particulier le rapport entre la maternité et la citoyenneté. J'utilise les écrits de Mary Wollstonecraft et Carole Pateman pour informer mon argument que les charges maternelles ne sont pas valorisées par les sociétés libérales parce qu'elles ne sont pas reconnues comme étant des bienfaits publics et ont lieu dans le domaine privé du domicile. J'examine également l'aliénation des mères seules sur l'aide sociale pour déterminer comment la pauvreté, la défavorisation sociale, et un manque systémique d'identification affectent leur sens de la citoyenneté. Je conclus que la division entre la sphère publique et privée de la société doit être réduite pour faciliter un changement d'attitude envers la citoyenneté des femmes, de sorte que la maternité puisse être reconnue formellement et publiquement comme devoir civil valable.

"Our highly praised independence is after all, but a slow process of dulling and stifling women's nature, her love instinct, and her mother instinct..."

-Emma Goldman

Women's citizenship in contemporary liberal society is not a homogenous category that can be analyzed from a single, objective position. Rather, it is fraught by divisions of class, socioeconomic positioning, education, and marital status. In this paper I will attempt to analyze the relationship between mothering and citizenship in order to determine whether motherhood is considered a valuable civil duty and how a woman's choice to bear children can potentially undermine her civil role. The concept of women's citizenship is informed by a broad spectrum of feminist theory. I chose to consult the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft and Carol Pateman who both argue that society must

be radically transformed in order to accommodate women's unique roles as citizens.

I approached this paper on the basis that citizenship in contemporary liberal society is measured by individuals paid labour in the work force which is the underlying principle of Carole Pateman's essay,

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"The Patriarchal Welfare State"¹. According to this in the broadest sense of the term. The traditional liberal definition of citizenship is contingent upon an individual's ability to participate in the public realm. Within this context an individual's presence in the public sphere serves their "private interests rather than a common good"². If citizenship is restricted to the traditional liberal definition women who work in the domestic sphere are overlooked. Furthermore, impoverished women are subjected to socially endorsed prejudices, which diminish their sense of citizenship because they depend on state assistance to provide for their families.

Mary Wollstonecraft's conception of motherhood and citizenship calls the traditional liberal division of the public and private spheres into question. Whereas Wollstonecraft, a republican thinker, maintains that the domestic and public spheres are interdependent and equally valuable entities, liberalism is based upon the premise that they should remain divided. Wollstonecraft argues that the public and private spheres should be unified and in doing so she characterizes motherhood as a civil duty even though it is acted out in the home³. She writes, "...his wife, also an active citizen, should be equally intent to manage her family, educate her children, and assist her neighbours."⁴ Wollstonecraft highlights the educational and moral components of child-rearing to suggest that the well-being of families directly impacts the state.

Carol Pateman problematizes this conception of an all-encompassing public and private sphere by arguing that contemporary society judges women's citizenship according to their ability to participate in the

workforce. She states, "...in the patriarchal welfare state... 'women' have been opposed to the 'worker' and the 'citizen'..."⁵ Therefore, single mothers who depend upon social assistance to survive are not regarded as full citizens either. In this paper I will use Pateman's arguments to inform my criticisms of the modern liberal state to determine whether Wollstonecraft's vision of an all-encompassing political and social structure is viable in contemporary society.

Wollstonecraft insists upon the relationship between the public and private spheres; thus, she characterizes women's maternal roles as civil duties. She states, "...their first duty is to themselves as rational creatures, and the next, in point of importance, as citizens, is that, which includes so many, of a mother."⁶ In Wollstonecraft's view women's education plays a significant role in their ability to raise their children to become active members of society. She subscribes to the traditional notion that motherhood is women's primary duty. However, Wollstonecraft suggests that women's maternal duties require more than the basic nurturing of children's needs. She argues that mothers must educate their children, manage the household, and be a supportive neighbour.⁷ These particular duties support her belief that mothering extends beyond the confines of the home. She argues that the education and the upbringing of children impact the community. Thus, mothers are entrusted with the responsibility of teaching their children to be self-aware, moral beings.

In Wollstonecraft's view, education develops women's self-sufficiency by helping them to make informed decisions about issues that affect their lives. She writes, "Business of various kinds, they might likewise pursue, if they were educated in a more orderly manner, which might save many from common and legal prostitution...Women would not then marry for support...and neglect their implied duties."⁸ She argues that the state should take an ac-

¹ Carole Pateman, *The Patriarchal State In Feminism, the Public and the Private* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 242.

² Pamela Johnstone Conover, Ivor M. Crewe, and Donald D. Searing, "The Nature of Citizenship in the United States and Great Britain: Empirical Comments on Theoretical Themes," in *The Journal of Politics*, 53, no. 3 (1991), 802.

³ Mary Wollstonecraft Selections from: *Vindication of the Rights of Women In Vindication of the Rights of Women*, edited by D.L MacDonald and Kathleen Sherf 284 (Peterborough: Broadview, 1997).

⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft, 280.

⁵ Carole Pateman, 242.

⁶ Mary Wollstonecraft, 283.

⁷ Ibid, 287.

⁸ Ibid, 286.

tive role in the education of women so that they are not reduced to desperate situations in which they either degrade themselves or neglect their duties out of disdain for their positions.

Essentially, by recognizing mothers as contributing members of society, women are afforded the opportunity to fulfill a valuable social role in a domestic or professional setting. Wollstonecraft suggests that the state is responsible for providing women with viable economic options. She states, "...is not that government then very defective...that does not provide for honest, independent women, by encouraging them to fulfill respectable stations?"⁹ In her view, education facilitates the connection between domestic and public life by allowing mothers to fulfill duties that contribute to the community.

Therefore, Wollstonecraft believes that education should be a "grand national concern."¹⁰ Her understanding of education includes a combination of maternal teachings and public schooling. She states, "Public education, of every denomination, should be directed to form citizens...for public affections as well as public virtues, must ever grow out of private character...."¹¹ She argues for the mitigation of class divisions by providing a universal education, "...where boys and girls, the rich and the poor, should meet together."¹² In any case, Wollstonecraft argues that education should be undertaken as a state initiative to socialize children and promote equality at a young age.

Wollstonecraft believes that the state can benefit from educating women. If women are educated they can be viewed as citizens in the fullest sense regardless of whether they choose to fulfill a maternal, professional, or political role. Wollstonecraft argues, "Let an enlightened nation then try what effect reason would have to bring them [women] back to nature, and their duty; and allowing them to share the advantages of education and government with

man...as they grow wiser and become free."¹³ If this is the key to women's emancipation, the opportunity to become educated and to use their rationality, then education could enrich women's maternal and civil experiences.

Women's citizenship would be broadened if women actively participated in their communities and had access to education to enrich their lives. Wollstonecraft reiterates the importance of women pursuing activities outside of the home by stating, "...women cannot be confined to merely domestic pursuits, for they will not fulfill family duties unless their minds take a wider range...."¹⁴ Therefore, if mothers were conceived as the moral and intellectual caretakers of the next generation they would improve community ties and command greater respect in the public sphere.

However, Wollstonecraft's arguments are primarily based upon the assumption that the mother's choice to remain in the home is economically compensated by a husband's ability to earn a living in the workforce. Wollstonecraft also assumes that the public and private spheres are interconnected and equally valued. Contemporary liberal society upholds the division between the public and private spheres, which undermines her understanding of women's citizenship. It is precisely because contemporary society renders motherhood as a private rather than public duty that women's citizenship is diminished and that their work is not valued. I would argue that, in theory, her arguments provide an ideal for women's citizenship; yet, contemporary society is plagued by social prejudice and economic inequality. These issues must be addressed before motherhood can be valued as a civil duty.

In "The Patriarchal Welfare State" Carole Pateman argues that the contemporary social framework is based upon liberal principles which create a definitive separation between the public and private spheres. Pateman claims that women's inability to enter the workforce because of domestic

⁹ Ibid, 287.

¹⁰ Ibid, 298.

¹¹ Ibid, 303.

¹² Ibid, 311.

¹³ Ibid, 310.

¹⁴ Ibid, 318.

obligations robs their independence and dignity. She writes,

...the central criterion for citizenship has been 'independence, and the elements encompassed under the heading of independence have been based on masculine attributes and abilities. Men, but not women, have been seen as possessing the capacities required of 'individuals', 'workers' and 'citizens.'¹⁵

Women who remain in the domestic sphere, managing their households and raising their children are not valued as contributing members of society simply because they do not participate in the labour market. Thus, women who choose to work in the domestic sphere are not regarded as workers and their labour does not warrant public recognition.

Single mothers who depend upon social assistance are even more isolated than those women whose husbands support them financially. Women who fall into the bottom of the socioeconomic spectrum are noticeably marginalized because of increasing class divisions in capitalist society. Single mothers and their children who receive welfare are arguably the most impoverished group in society. Canadian statistics indicate that 65 percent of single mother families' incomes fell below the poverty line in 1996 (Canadian Council for Social Development Website 2004). Pateman cites comparable statistics suggesting that households supported by females are three times more likely to be impoverished than males.¹⁶ Therefore, from an economic standpoint

Furthermore, Pateman demonstrates how impoverished individuals such as single mothers are subject to social prejudices that rob their dignity because of their dependence on the state. This divide between the public and private spheres infers that, "...citizens thrown into poverty lack both the means for self-respect and the means to be recognized by fellow citizens as of equal worth to themselves, a recognition basic to democracy."¹⁷ According to this ar-

gument single mothers are stigmatized by other citizens, causing them to doubt their own worth as they internalize such prejudices.

Pateman highlights the notion that single mothers who rely on state benefits are considered lazy.¹⁸ She suggests that the traditional distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor significantly undermines the citizenship of single mothers on welfare. "Deserving poor" are those individuals who receive benefits throughout their working careers whereas "undeserving poor" refers to individuals who receive social assistance because they cannot participate in the labour market. In Pateman's view, single mothers are blamed for receiving, "... "public handouts" to barely deserving poor people."¹⁹ Single mothers and their families fall into this category because they struggle to survive in severely impoverished conditions while other citizens believe they are cheating the system. However, women cannot enter the workforce without affordable day-care because minimum wage jobs provide insufficient health benefits and barely enough money to live on. Social stereotyping diminishes women's perception of their own citizenship which economically and socially isolates their families.

A study by Seccombe, James and Walters, which explores the socially constructed image of women on welfare, concludes that single mothers do not have the same opportunities as other adults to earn a decent living because they bear the sole responsibility of household and child-care duties²⁰. Women in such situations are stigmatized as lazy and unmotivated because of the myth that all citizens have an equal opportunity to increase their own wealth and position²¹. One single mother is quoted, "I've had people who didn't know that I was on welfare and everything was just fine.

¹⁸ Ibid, 268.

¹⁹ Ibid, 250.

²⁰ Karen Seccombe, James Delores and Kimberly Battle Walters, "They Think You Ain't Much of Nothing: The Social Construction of the Welfare Mother," *Journal of Marriage And Family*, 60, no. 7 (2003). 852.

²¹ Karen Seccombe, James Delores and Kimberly Battle Walters, 849

¹⁵ Carol Pateman, 248.

¹⁶ Ibid, 243.

¹⁷ Ibid, 244.

But when people find out that you are receiving assistance, it's like, why? Why did you get lazy all of the sudden?"²² According to this account, women who are known to receive social assistance are more likely to be judged as burdens to the state.

Pateman argues that women's citizenship is undermined by liberal-feminist ideology, which advocates for a society of equal opportunities. If no distinctions are made between male and female responsibilities women must conform to a standard of citizenship based on a male ideal.²³ Furthermore, those who fulfill the traditional roles of house-keeper and mother are not considered full citizens because society does not value this unpaid work. As Pateman states, "...to demand proper social recognition and support for women's responsibilities is to condemn women to less than full citizenship and to continued incorporation in to public life as women...who cannot... earn the respect of fellow (male) citizens."²⁴ Pateman argues that single mothers are in "social exile,"²⁵ because they cannot access child-care and other means of support which could alleviate their impoverished conditions and the social stigmas which are forced upon them.

Given this bleak picture of contemporary society one might ask whether women's sense of citizenship can be improved to address the marginalization of single mothers and their families. Wollstonecraft's vision of an all-encompassing public and private realm provides a theoretical solution to the systemic exclusion of women. She envisions a society in which motherhood is valued as a civil duty thereby incorporating the domestic and private spheres. Furthermore, Pateman argues that citizenship can no longer be based on male characteristics and participation in the labour market. Pateman argues that society must radically transform its inherent values and begin to acknowledge the work that is carried out in the domestic sphere. Accord-

ing to this view, citizenship can no longer be based on a male ideal if women are to enjoy full citizenship in a society that endorses equal rights.

Women's roles in society must be publicly recognized before these changes can take place. First, the definitions of civil duty must be broadened in order to include mothering as a valuable community asset. In order to facilitate this formal recognition the barrier between the private and public spheres must be broken down, so that the unpaid labour of mothering is no longer diminished and overlooked. Adequate and affordable childcare should be implemented to increase women's opportunities for higher education and participation in the workforce. If single mothers on welfare have the opportunity to improve their families' economic condition perhaps they could eventually provide for themselves without state assistance. Finally, single mothers must no longer be stereotyped as lazy and undeserving. Society must acknowledge its role in marginalizing women so that it can begin to develop means of formally recognizing all women regardless of their social and economic position.

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²² Karen Secombe, James Delores and Kimberly Battle Walters, 849.

²³ Carole Pateman, 261.

²⁴ Ibid, 261.

²⁵ Ibid, 261.

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