

Liberal Complacencies

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I AGREE with the basic claim of Okin's paper—that a liberal egalitarian (and feminist) approach to multiculturalism must look carefully at intragroup inequalities, and specifically at gender inequalities, when examining the legitimacy of minority group rights. Justice within ethnocultural groups is as important as justice between ethnocultural groups. Group rights are permissible if they help promote justice between ethnocultural groups, but are impermissible if they create or exacerbate gender inequalities within the group.

In my recent work, I have tried to emphasize this point by distinguishing between two kinds of "group rights." Sometimes an ethnocultural group claims rights against its own members—in particular, the right to restrict individual choice in the name of cultural "tradition" or cultural "integrity." I call such group rights "internal restrictions," since their aim is to restrict the ability of individuals within the group (particularly women) to question, revise, or abandon traditional cultural roles and practices. A liberal theory of minority group rights, I have argued, cannot accept such internal restrictions, since they violate the autonomy of individuals and create injustice within the group.

However, liberals can accept a second sort of group rights—namely, rights that a minority group claims against the larger society in order to reduce its vulnerability to the economic or political power of the larger society. Such rights, which I call "external protections," can take the form of language rights, guaranteed political representation, funding of ethnic media, land claims, compensation for historical injustice, or the regional devolution of power. All of

these can help to promote justice between ethnocultural groups, by ensuring that members of the minority have the same effective capacity to promote their interests as the majority.

Okin argues, in effect, that my account of "internal restrictions" is too narrow. I defined internal restrictions as those claims by a group which involve limiting the civil and political liberties of individual members, but Okin insists that the ability of women to question and revise their traditional gender roles can be drastically curtailed even when their civil rights are formally protected in the public sphere.

I accept this point. In fact, I had not intended "individual freedoms" to be interpreted in a purely formal or legalistic way, and I would consider the domestic oppressions that Okin discusses to be paradigmatic examples of the sorts of "internal restrictions" which liberals must oppose.

So I accept Okin's claim that we need a more subtle account of internal restrictions which helps us identify limitations on the freedom of women within ethnocultural groups. But it still seems to me that the basic distinction is sound—i.e., liberals can accept external protections which promote justice between groups, but must reject internal restrictions which reduce freedom within groups. Okin is suggesting a constructive elaboration of this distinction, but I see no reason to reject the underlying principle.

Yet Okin seems to think that feminists should therefore be deeply skeptical about the very category of minority group rights. More generally, she suggests that feminists should view multiculturalism not as a likely ally in a broader struggle for a more inclusive justice, but as a likely threat to whatever gains feminists have made over the last few decades.

I think this way of opposing feminism and multiculturalism is regrettable. After all, both are making the same point about the inadequacy of the traditional liberal conception of individual rights. In her own work, Okin has argued that women's equality cannot be achieved solely through women's being given the same set of formal individual rights which men possess. We must also pay attention to the structure of societal institutions (e.g., the workplace, family, etc.), and to the sorts of images and expectations people are exposed

to in schools and the media, since these are typically gendered in an unfair way, using the male as the "norm."

Similarly, multiculturalists argue that we cannot achieve justice between ethnocultural groups simply by guaranteeing to ethnocultural minorities the same set of formal individual rights which the majority possesses. We must also examine the structure of institutions (e.g., the language, calendar, and uniforms that they use), and the content of schooling and media, since all of these take the majority culture as the "norm."

Moreover, both feminists and multiculturalists provide the same explanation for why traditional liberal theories are not satisfactory. Historically, liberal theorists were explicitly prejudiced against women and ethnic or racial minorities. Today, however, the problem is one of invisibility. In her work, Okin has shown how liberal theorists implicitly or explicitly operate with the assumption that the citizen is a man, and never ask what sorts of institutions or principles women would choose (e.g., if they were behind Rawls's "veil of ignorance"). In my work, I show that liberal theorists have operated with the assumption that citizens share the same language and national culture, and never ask what sorts of institutions would be chosen by ethnocultural minorities. In both cases, the distinctive needs and interests of women and ethnocultural minorities are simply never addressed in the theory. And in both cases, the result is that liberalism has been blind to grave injustices which limit the freedom and harm the self-respect of women and ethnocultural minorities.

Finally, both feminism and multiculturalism look to similar remedies. Okin says that she is concerned about the view that the members of a minority "are not sufficiently protected by the practice of ensuring the individual rights of their members," and minority group members are demanding "a group right not available to the rest of the population." But many feminists have made precisely the same argument about gender equality—i.e., that true equality will require rights for women that are not available to men, such as affirmative action, women-only classrooms, gender-specific prohibitions on pornography, gender-specific health programs, and the like. Others have made similar arguments about the need for group-

specific rights and benefits for the disabled, or for gays and lesbians. All of these movements are challenging the traditional liberal assumption that equality requires identical treatment.

So I see multiculturalism and feminism as allies engaged in related struggles for a more inclusive conception of justice. Indeed, my own thoughts on ethnocultural justice have been deeply influenced by Okin's work on gender justice, since I think there are many comparable historical patterns and contemporary lessons.

Okin worries that the currently fashionable attention to multiculturalism is obscuring the older struggle for gender inequality. This is true of some multiculturalists, just as it is true that some feminists have been blind to issues of cultural difference. But it would be a mistake—in both theory and practice—to think that struggling against gender inequality within ethnocultural groups requires denying or downplaying the extent of injustice between groups. These are both grave injustices, and liberalism's historic inability to recognize them is rooted in similar theoretical mistakes. The same attitudes and habits of mind that enabled liberals to ignore the just claims of women have also enabled them to ignore the just claims of ethnocultural minorities. We have a common interest in fighting these liberal complacencies.