

The Rhetoric of Privacy and the Gendering of Domestic Violence in the Covid-19 Pandemic

PARVATHI M.S.

Abstract

Feminist geographers such as Doreen Massey and Gillian Rose propound that space is produced by and is productive of gender relations. Feminist critical purview identifies the public/private binary as one of the sites in which the structures of gender and space overlap. The demarcation of the public and private spheres predicates on spatial practices which isolate the embodied, domestic activities of the private sphere from the putatively disembodied, political public sphere. However, the massive unemployment rates and institutional work-from-home (WFH) practices consequent to the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated the geographical refashioning of workplaces, undermining the demarcation of the public and the private. Paradoxically, this deterritorialization has not destabilized the gendered spatial practices informing the public/private binary. Irrespective of the construction of home as a feminine space, the domestic sphere is embedded in the heterosexual matrix and has traditionally been subject to the authority of the paterfamilias. The lockdown and quarantine measures aggravated the vulnerable positioning of women in their homes and predictably engendered a cataclysmic rise in domestic violence cases. The rhetoric of privacy embedded in the ideology of domesticity facilitates violence against women despite the criminalization of domestic abuse. The proposed paper problematizes the public/private divide and analyzes how the notion of the private domestic space legitimizes the instances of gendered violence reported during the pandemic.

Keywords: space, gender, public/private binary, work-from-home, privacy, domestic violence

Introduction

Feminist geography imbricates space in a mutually constitutive relationship with gender, suggesting that space produces and in turn, is productive of gender relations (Rendell 102). Gendered spaces are sites that typify this mutually constitutive relationship of gender and space. Spaces can be considered as sexed on the basis of the biological sex of those positioned within these sites and as gendered according to the nature of the activities occurring in them. This conceptualization of space as gendered is adapted from the writings of Marxist geographers such as David Harvey (1989) and Edward Soja (1989), who postulate that space is socially producing while emerging as a condition for social production. The works of these geographers were influenced by studies in anthropology, which was one of the first disciplines to codify the relation between gender and space apropos power relations. Yet, feminist geographers were critical of Harvey and Soja,

arguing that they overlooked the primacy of gender in structuring space and society. The paradigm of the public and the private spheres is one of the pervasive modes in which gender operates to produce segregated spaces. Within this paradigm, the public sphere is associated with reason and masculinity, whereas women are relegated to the sphere of domestic private sphere. Though women are discursively limited to private spaces, men are endowed with increased movement between the two spheres. This movement is on account of the mutually exclusive and opposing modes of construction of these spheres. Domestic spaces (such as home) are construed as havens from the hustle and bustle of the male sphere of production, which enables the emergence of an ideal of domesticity. However, the onset of COVID-19 has dissolved the demarcation of public and private spheres, as the pandemic-control measures in several countries have contributed to the shifting of the geographies of workspaces to the domestic sphere. Paradoxically, the dismantling of the public/private binary in the wake of the pandemic has increased the vulnerability of women to domestic violence. The paper attempts to explore how the ideology of the separate spheres contributes to the increased incidents of domestic violence towards within with the onset of the pandemic.

Gendering of Domestic Spaces and the Rhetoric of Privacy

The ideology of the separate spheres is embedded in contemporary spatial practices as well as in philosophy. Philosophers like Immanuel Kant conflated the public/private binary with mind/body dualism and located reason in the public sphere (Duncan 17). The delegitimizing of the body is, according to Iris Marion Young, embedded in liberal political theory which relies on “an opposition between public and private dimensions of human life, which corresponds to an opposition between reason on the one hand and the body, affectivity, and desire on the other” (qtd in Duncan 22). Kant’s disembodied Enlightenment individual is defined by his willingness to use reason in a public space and is embedded in structures of masculinity. The materiality of women’s bodies forecloses their participation in the public space and instead relegates them to the private space which is structured by feelings rather than by the universal principle of reason and knowledge. The mind/body dualism and its accompanying public/private binary promote the exclusion of women from the public space and from domains of science and knowledge. This oppositional and hierarchical system promotes the separation of the dominant public male realm of production from the subordinate female private sphere of reproduction. The political and spatial aspects of the public/private binary is often invoked to control, discipline, and exclude women from public spaces and thereby reinforce heterosexist and patriarchal power structures. As a result, this binary opposition perpetuates oppression and regulates sexuality according to gender relations (Duncan 128).

The idea of privacy embedded in patriarchal family structures, private property, and personal autonomy is one of the modes of perpetuating gendered oppression. Lawrence Stone (1977) suggested that the notion of privacy in the domestic sphere emerged with the inception of the notion of European nation-state. After its inception, the institutions of the state as well as the private households attempted to reify the structures of family and to reduce the control of the state over the family unit. This led to the emergence of the ideology of domesticity which emulated the structures of the state, with the paterfamilias as the head of the household. The influence of paternal dominance in the ideological construction of home is a recurring motif in contemporary culture, if not in political administration. As Judith Squires remarks:

The preliberal antiliberal patriarchal tradition of family sovereignty, has for reasons not inherent to the liberal tradition itself, been incorporated—tortuously—into the liberal rhetoric and legislation on privacy rights. Individual autonomy, which is the bedrock of liberal theory, has in practice been conflated with family autonomy (qtd in Duncan 131).

Embedded within the structures of family, women have been deemed as private and embodied, incapable of independent political thought and objectivity. Though women are limited to the private space where they are held responsible for the care of children and elderly, men move between public and private spheres with more legitimacy (Valentine 1989).

The liberal political theory and law territorialize spaces in order to reify the segregation of the public and private spheres and thus enabling non-interference by the state. The home situated in this segregated private sphere has often been subjected to a patriarchal authority in spite of its feminine association. The home is often the site where structures of masculinity, patriarchy, and ownership rights of private property converge and thereby bestows greater autonomy to the male members of the household. This individual autonomy of the paterfamilias often challenges and undermines the personal safety of the women and children occupying the private space (Duncan 131). The patriarchal challenge to women's safety is exacerbated by the onset of the pandemic as women are increasingly sequestered with the paterfamilias within confined spaces of their households. With the introduction of lockdown measures in countries across the world, there has been a sharp increase in cases of domestic violence around the world, (prompting the UN to declare domestic violence as a shadow pandemic). Within the first month of the lockdown within the country, the National Commission for Women identified an upsurge in domestic violence cases that went reported, registering a seventy percent rise from the figures from the previous months. The reporting of domestic violence is facilitated by the Domestic Violence Act, 2005, which provides women with protection against violence in domestic spaces, and enables them to report and seek legal redressal. However, the rhetoric of privacy which permeates the ideology of domesticity privatizes incidents of domestic violence and deems them as issues that should be limited to the confines of the household. As a result, women who are culturally conditioned by the ideology of domesticity are hesitant towards the idea of seek legal recourse to domestic violence.

The contradictions between the ideas of privacy that assume the individual autonomy of the paterfamilias and the “violence of privacy” determine the framing of structural solutions to domestic violence (Schneider 1994). The patriarchal structuring of households bestows the paterfamilias with the right to the bodies of the women, subjecting the latter to increased risks of sexual violence. Though legal ideas of privacy were introduced to preserve civil rights and personal freedom, the hegemony of privacy promotes inequalities in gendering of spaces:

(The rhetoric of privacy) mask physical abuse and other manifestations of power and inequality within the family... The belief is that it is for family members to sort out their personal relationships. What this overlooks is the power inequalities inside the family that are affected by structures external to it (O'Donovan 1993:272).

It is often seemingly innocent measures that perpetuate the systemic oppression underlying domestic violence, that include encouraging the women in the family to stay at home at night or restricting their travels unless they are escorted by someone, ideally the male members of the household. Such individualistic changes indict men and women as complicit in perpetuating public and private sexual violence and crystallize the gender

relations that create such patterns of sexual violence. Nancy Duncan notes that police officers often neglect to investigate domestic disturbances and often come in support of the batterer who is showing his nagging wife her place, rather than offer institutional support to the victim (133).

These instances of domestic violence are not merely the product of the lockdown measures with the onset of the pandemic. Instead, they stem from the spatial structuring of the household. As a result, cases of domestic violence require larger systemic solutions rather than individualistic changes. Many structural programmes aimed at aiding the victims of domestic violence involve establishing a support system outside the spatial and structural confines of the home. This is because the abuser often resorts to spatial strategies in isolating the partner from her social networks and in confining her to the domestic space. Moreover, these structural changes should also aim at reducing the emotional and financial dependence of the women on her abusers. Women's shelters often emerge as sites of alternative housing, offering strategies of resisting the spatially isolating strategies of the partner and provide the victims with support networks.

Conclusion

The interrelationship between what is understood and experienced as private and public is particularly complex in the area of gender where the rhetoric of privacy has masked inequality and subordination. The decision about what we protect as private is a political discussion that always has important public ramifications (Schneider 1991:978).

Though home can provide a safe site for disempowered groups, isolation in a private space can have a depoliticizing effect on a group and challenge their access to the wider public sphere. However, as Brian Massumi theorizes, there is a difference between "entrenching one's self in a closed space" and "arraying one's self in an open space" (1992: 6). The streets emerge as sites of deterritorializing and of opening up the entrenched notions of public sphere. Within this open public sphere, home comes across as forts of domination. Alternative housing in the form of women's shelters resists the spatializing strategies perpetuated by the public/private divide, which relegate women to domestic spaces, often with abusive partners. Feminist critical purview identifies the public/private binary as one of the sites in which the structures of gender and space overlap. The demarcation of the public and private spheres predicates on spatial practices which isolate the embodied, domestic activities of the private sphere from the putatively disembodied, political public sphere. However, the massive unemployment rates and institutional work-from-home (WFH) practices consequent to the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated the geographical refashioning of workplaces, undermining the demarcation of the public and the private. Paradoxically, this deterritorialization has not destabilized the gendered spatial practices informing the public/private binary. Irrespective of the construction of home as a feminine space, the domestic sphere is embedded in the heterosexual matrix and has traditionally been subject to the authority of the paterfamilias. The lockdown and quarantine measures aggravated the vulnerable positioning of women in their homes and predictably engendered a cataclysmic rise in domestic violence cases. The rhetoric of privacy embedded in the ideology of domesticity facilitates violence against women despite the criminalization of domestic abuse through the legalization of the Domestic Violence Act, 2005. Many women do not resort to legal measures and even refuse to remove themselves to women's shelters on account of the prevailing sense of shame underlying the ideology of domesticity. So, rather than individualistic measures, we

should aim for larger structural changes like deterritorializing public and private spheres that question the link between individualism and privacy and enabling legal changes to the right to privacy that involves limited interference of the state in the private sphere.

The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad

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