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Liberal feminism, diversity and education

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abstract

Liberal feminism, like liberal political theory in general, is sometimes criticized for overemphasizing equality and the promotion of autonomy at the expense of valuing diversity. Some might thus see an approach to difference in education that is based on liberal feminism as a threat to cultural diversity. This article argues that although cultural diversity has some benefits, liberal feminism should not be deterred from promoting autonomy and equality for women by encouraging the alteration of practices that harm their interests. Siding with Susan Moller Okin's liberal feminism in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* the contrast between comprehensive and political liberalism in recent work by Okin and by Martha Nussbaum is explored. It is claimed that a liberal feminist approach to the education of women and girls would necessarily be a form of comprehensive liberalism.

keywords *comprehensive liberalism, diversity, education, feminism, political liberalism*

introduction

A long-standing criticism of liberal political theory and its attendant conception of education is that they have tended to underestimate the significance and worth of diversity. As such, in their pursuit of equality, they pose a threat to cultural diversity. In responding to these claims, one needs to start by recognizing that liberalism itself is diverse. I propose here to consider liberal feminism and its conception of education. While liberal feminism has long been dismissed by its feminist rivals, it is undergoing a revival in recent work by Susan Moller Okin and Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 1999a, 1999b, 2000; Nussbaum and Glover, 1995; Okin, 1989, 1994, 1998, 1999), to which I will return.

I take liberal feminist education to share some core features of mainstream

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liberal education, with a central emphasis on a broad education that fosters freedom by developing autonomy. In doing so, the feminist variant would pay particular attention to encouraging the growth of autonomy among girls, and their capacity to choose roles and lifestyles rather than being forced to accept traditionally defined ones. Girls and boys would be encouraged to see one another as equals, and the education system would set out to ensure that girls have equal access to rewarding work and financial independence, as well as the opportunity to exercise their rights as citizens. In pursuit of these goals, liberal feminism does indeed seem directed towards removing those differences which have favoured boys and acted against the interests of girls. These differences are fostered by a variety of practices that appeal to cultural and religious traditions for their justification. And so it seems that if it succeeds, liberal feminist education, like liberal education in general but more so, probably would reduce diversity to some extent.

There are good reasons to accept that cultural diversity has some benefits. As Bikhu Parekh (2000) argues, having access to different cultures expands one's horizons, allows the freedom to step outside one's own culture and to see its contingency, provides opportunities for mutually enriching dialogue between different traditions, and alerts us to the diversity within our own culture. But calls to simply celebrate and protect, if not foster, diversity are often empty of substance. As the spectre of the cultural Californication of the globe looms it is also commonly claimed that reducing cultural diversity will lead to cultural homogeneity, resulting in a loss of cultural coherence, alienation and perhaps even social and political instability. There seems to be no clear empirical evidence in favour of such claims; while globalization is blurring geographical and cultural boundaries, there has also been a revival of local, regional and national identities. Liberals and their opponents alike (see for example Macedo, 2000; Parekh, 2000) can agree that we should not indiscriminately defend all differences.

I take the position that liberal feminism should not be deterred from promoting autonomy and equality for girls and women by claims about deleterious consequences of removing some of the diversity between cultures. In this I share Eamonn Callan's support for 'educationally subversive liberalism' (Callan, 1996), agreeing with his view that the social costs that might be incurred by political education based on autonomy are worth it if they counter domination. While liberalism is criticized for its tendency to favour equality over diversity, it does remind us of the tragic side of difference, and how it has frequently been the cause of inequality, oppression and instability. I propose to examine how liberal feminists should envisage the project of fostering autonomy in the face of opposition by some cultures, including what constraints should be imposed on that project. The discussion will start

with an exploration of an important current debate about the relationship between feminism and multiculturalism. I will defend a comprehensive version of liberalism as necessary to liberal feminist education, arguing that liberal feminists should be less reluctant to side with comprehensive liberalism.

‘is multiculturalism bad for women?’

Some of the key issues in assessing the significance of diversity and how to accommodate it in a liberal democracy arise in the intriguing debate prompted by Susan Moller Okin’s *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (Okin and respondents, 1999). Acknowledging the earlier assimilationist tendencies in western liberalism, Okin asks what liberal states should do when minority cultures or religions make claims that clash with norms of gender equality that are (at least formally) endorsed by the majority culture, particularly when such groups claim special rights for their members. Okin argues that in such circumstances there is likely to be a tension between feminism and multiculturalist defence of group rights for minority cultures. Given that most cultures promote men’s control of women, defending group rights on the grounds that people need their own culture turns a blind eye to cultural groups’ imposition of unequal gender roles. Because many cultures oppress their women members, and are able to socialize women into unquestioning acceptance of their designated status, Okin argues that when special rights are claimed by cultural or religious groups liberal states should pay attention to women’s status within those groups. They should not simply accept the argument that the minority culture should be preserved, for example in order to secure the self-respect or freedom of their female members. Instead, policies that set out to address the needs and demands of cultural minorities ought to provide for the representation of their less powerful members in negotiations about group rights. Thus, it cannot be assumed that those who present themselves as leaders of those groups represent the interests of women, especially younger women.

The problems identified by Okin lead her to propose not only a different approach to representation of minority cultural groups. A further proposal, which has provoked a strong reaction from some of her respondents (e.g. Honig, 1999), is that while there are various considerations that would have to be taken into account, such minority women

might be much better off if the culture into which they were born were either to become extinct (so that its members would become integrated into the less sexist surrounding culture) or, preferably, to be encouraged to alter itself so as to reinforce the equality of women – at least to the degree to which this value is upheld in the majority culture. (Okin, 1999: 22–3)

In reply to Bonnie Honig's mistaken claim that Okin's paper encourages the extinguishing of cultures, Okin observes that:

In most instances people exercising their individual rights will have greater impact on whether their culture stays the same, changes, or becomes extinct in a particular context because its members assimilate, more or less slowly, and wholly or partially, into one of the alternative cultures available, which is the kind of 'becom[ing] extinct' I had in mind. . . . (Okin, 1999: 117)

Okin's choice of the term 'extinction' here is perhaps unfortunate, with its connotations of the extermination of a biological species, of irreversible loss. But more important to her argument is the idea that cultures have the potential to change and that deliberation about changing some of their traditions is possible.

political or comprehensive liberalism?

Apart from the idea of cultures becoming extinct, the other feature of Okin's essay that provoked a sharp reaction from her respondents was her treatment of religion. In her response to Okin's essay, Martha Nussbaum takes issue with what she sees as Okin's secularist contempt for religion, which she accuses her of discussing in an offhand and superficial way. Nussbaum sees Okin's stance as:

embracing a form of comprehensive liberalism, in which liberal values of autonomy and dignity pervade the fabric of the body politic, determining not only the core of the political conception but many noncore social and political matters as well. (Nussbaum, 1999a: 108)

Here Nussbaum draws on a key distinction made by John Rawls in his *Political Liberalism* (1993a). Rawls sets out to answer the question of how a society that is just and stable could be achieved in spite of its citizens being divided by doctrines – religious, philosophical and moral – that are incompatible yet all reasonable. Rawls's solution is to propose an ideal in which citizens achieve an 'overlapping consensus' by agreeing to a basic structure that all reasonable persons – regardless of their own comprehensive doctrines but consistent with them – can accept. This political conception of justice does not invoke the idea of autonomy, which is a moral value belonging to a particular comprehensive doctrine. 'The appeal is rather to the political value of a public life conducted on terms that all reasonable citizens can accept as fair' (Rawls, 1993a: 98). While the political conception is shared by all, regardless of differences in their comprehensive doctrines, in the non-public sphere persons will live according to those comprehensive doctrines.

For Nussbaum, Okin's view treats as a goal of the state the promotion of

personal autonomy in all spheres of life. Moral liberals of this kind are prepared to recognize religious liberty and to respect the choices made by believers, but only up to a point. They will inevitably favour autonomous lives over hierarchically organized ones and use the state to discourage adherence to religions that do not favour autonomy in their followers' personal lives. Nussbaum does not view comprehensive conceptions of the good as providing appropriate reasons for state action, unlike political liberalism which would recognize the important role of religion in citizens' search for meaning and regard it as deserving the liberal state's defence. But for Okin, Nussbaum

appeals to the voluntary nature of religious membership in our society, to conclude that, so long as the liberties and opportunities of children are ensured by their education, society should then respect the rights of adult citizens to join or remain in religious bodies that exclude women from certain religious functions, such as the Catholic priesthood. (Okin, 1999: 28)

Okin resists Nussbaum's characterization of her position as that of a comprehensive liberal, and places it in between political and comprehensive liberalism, because it 'requires that children's education not leave them with knowledge only of their parents' culture or religion, much less that it give them the impression that that is the only 'right' way to live' (Okin, 1999: 129). Okin sees Nussbaum as placing herself, similarly, between comprehensive and political liberalism, by recognizing that children's education should ensure a range of liberties and opportunities, while respecting non-autonomous lives chosen by mature adults who are aware of other options. It is therefore not unreasonable, for Okin, 'to require both that children's education – including their religious education – be non-sexist, and that all children be thoroughly exposed to and taught about other religious as well as secular beliefs held by people around the world' (Okin, 1999: 130).

is political liberalism good for women?

I will argue that there are significant differences between the proposals made by Okin and Nussbaum to foster gender equality and Rawlsian political liberalism. These differences have important implications for defining liberal feminism and its project. In pursuing this argument, the distinction between political and comprehensive liberalism requires attention, in part to whether there *is* a clear-cut distinction between political and comprehensive liberalism, and also to the characterization of comprehensive liberalism that Okin and Nussbaum accept.

For Rawls, political liberalism requires that children be educated to understand the political conception of justice; they need to know about their rights and to learn to be cooperating members of their society, self-supporting and

with an understanding of public culture and institutions. While his political liberalism does not include fostering autonomy, he concedes that an unavoidable result of developing these qualities will sometimes be the development of autonomy as a comprehensive value. Crucial to the slippery slope implicit here is the notion of the burdens of judgment, the inevitable differences we encounter when we try to reason together. They have been the target of critics of political liberalism (e.g. Callan, 1996, 1997; Hampton, 1993), who have argued that the burdens of judgment make political liberalism inevitably slide into comprehensive liberalism.

For Callan, learning to accept the burdens of judgment will inevitably lead children to encounter comprehensive doctrines that are reasonable alternatives to those of their families and the other associations in which they grow up, with the possibility that they will accept autonomy as a comprehensive ideal. Rawls concedes the possibility of this accidental effect, though he does not propose it as the intention of education for political liberalism. But for Callan, the partition that Rawls tries to place between comprehensive and political liberalism thus collapses. 'The upshot of all this is that Rawlsian political liberalism is really a kind of closet comprehensive liberalism' (Callan, 1997: 40).

In their exchange about comprehensive liberalism, and their shared refusal to embrace it, Okin and Nussbaum appear to take comprehensive liberalism's defining characteristic as its favouring one comprehensive doctrine over others as well as using the state's resources to foster autonomy as a comprehensive ideal. But less attention has been given in the literature on political liberalism to defining comprehensive liberalism, compared with its political rival. Callan's work is, again, an exception, arguing that both political and comprehensive liberalism are internally diverse. For Callan, while some versions of comprehensive liberalism like utilitarianism and pragmatism have indeed been partisan in their commitment to a single criterion of right and wrong, the centrality of individual freedom to any recognizably liberal polity is incompatible with a comprehensively enforced ordering of values. A genuinely liberal moral doctrine cannot dictate all the details of the good life. Callan's view is that in liberal doctrines 'autonomy may be understood as precluding all reliance on moral or religious authority or, less expansively, as permitting certain kinds of obedience . . .' (Callan, 1997: 19). The latter interpretation seems to me to capture Okin's position.

The general tendency to attribute to comprehensive liberalism only its most expansive formulation is shared by Bikhu Parekh (2000: 196–7), who describes proponents of comprehensive liberalism as requiring the state to force cultural minorities to assimilate to the dominant national culture. This tendency to allow for no qualification to comprehensive liberalism's commitment to the goal of autonomy can to some extent be attributed to the unfortunate term

'comprehensive', which implies a thorough-going project. The terms 'moral' and 'ethical', sometimes used instead, suggest less expansive commitments.

Much attention is focused on the fostering of autonomy in discussions about political versus comprehensive liberalism. But there are other points of contrast between the two. In drawing attention to them, I suggest that they mark significant differences between these two strands of contemporary liberalism. We should not deduce from the argument that political liberalism inevitably collapses into comprehensive liberalism that there is ultimately little significant difference between them.

The first point of contrast between political and comprehensive liberalism concerns the nature and scope of politics and state policy, and has a crucial bearing on the definition of liberal feminism. Because his political conception of justice is 'for the main institutions of political and social life, not the whole of life' (Rawls, 1993a: 175), Rawls' distinction between the public and the non-public sets severe limits to the public sphere, restricting not only the state's role in promoting autonomy in the education system, but also other possible interventions. These include policies that could address inequalities between men and women, whether based on minority or majority cultures. Rawls places the inequalities of the non-public, including those of the domestic sphere, outside the scope of the political. Rawls' vision of liberalism makes for restricted and thin politics that would probably succeed in avoiding instability, but it also excludes interventions aimed at addressing many problems that face contemporary states, lest they raise disagreements and especially conflict between citizens' comprehensive views.

The second point is that Rawls' theory of political liberalism similarly constrains what liberals in a democracy like the USA can say about gender inequalities in societies other than those like the American one that he explicitly identifies as the type of context to which he usually confines his attention. Not only does Rawls restrict the political to the basic political structure, in developing his political conception of the relations between liberal and non-liberal societies, Rawls argues that:

Just as a citizen in a liberal society must respect other societies organized by comprehensive doctrines, so a liberal society must respect other societies organized by comprehensive doctrines, provided their political and social institutions meet certain conditions . . . (Rawls, 1993b: 43)

These conditions are quite modest and undemanding, such as respecting some basic human rights and being regarded as legitimate by their citizens.

A third point of contrast between political and comprehensive liberalism is that the narrow focus of Rawls's theory, placing the comprehensive doctrines off limits, whether within a liberal democracy or in other well-ordered if hierarchical societies, leaves little if any scope for public deliberation about culture

and its effects on women in non-western societies, including those that are culturally diverse.

Considering how Rawls restricts the scope of the political, whether within a western liberal democracy or between western liberals and citizens of other kinds of societies, it is surprising that Nussbaum calls herself a political liberal and that Okin places her own work somewhere between political and comprehensive liberalism. Okin's work (e.g. Okin 1989, 1994) is the most important single liberal feminist contribution to the feminist critique of women's place in the private sphere of the family. It has also offered a sustained engagement with Rawls's work, particularly his earlier *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Okin's argument in *Justice, Gender and the Family* (1989) thoroughly demonstrates the unequal power exercised by men and women in families, which is partly derived from the unequal wages usually brought to the household. Housework and care of children are not equally shared. Women's dependence on their husbands' income usually results in men taking major decisions and in some cases in women remaining with men who batter them. In order to achieve 'a just future without gender' (Okin, 1989: 171). Okin has proposed various interventions: equal entitlement to a household's earnings, that after divorce both households should have an equal standard of living, and provision by employers for day care for employees' children and for parental leave and flexible working hours. Her critique of the family requires that it become a public issue, making it a legitimate matter for state action and challenging the political liberals' distinction between public and non-public.

In another version of her argument that multiculturalism is bad for women, Okin (1998) develops a similar argument to the one explored above, but reaches a stronger conclusion about what should be done about the tensions between feminism and multiculturalism. Having attributed both to the west and to many of the cultures practised in the former colonial states of the Middle East and much of Africa and Asia a patriarchy aimed at ensuring that men control women's sexuality and reproduction, she asks why:

On liberal premises and within a liberal society, should a cultural group be 'entitled to live in their ways' if their ways violate the individual rights of their members? Why shouldn't the liberal state, instead, make it clear to members of such groups, preferably by education but where necessary by punishment, that such practices are not to be tolerated? (Okin, 1998: 676)

This suggests a more interventionist policy by the state towards unreasonable claims for special treatment put forward by minority cultures, and one that looks more comprehensive than political. Furthermore, the negotiations between liberal states and their cultural minorities and the likely processes resulting in cultural change that Okin envisages in her subsequent work (1999) implies some vigorous give and take, not the kind of restrained deliberation

that Rawls recommends. I also take Okin's arguments as having implications for how feminists in general should envisage the scope of their activities, not only within the state but also as members of non-government organizations, educators and in pressure groups.

Nussbaum addresses the relationship between her brand of liberal feminism and John Rawls' political liberalism at some length in *Women and Human Development: A Study of Human Capabilities* (Nussbaum, 2000), where she proposes an international feminism to underpin an ethical approach to development and policy. Focusing on the plight of poor women in India, Nussbaum observes that for most women in developing countries a failure of human capabilities results from a combination of poverty and gender inequality.

Nussbaum proposes, for implementation by all governments, 10 capabilities as the basic social minimum that would respect human dignity for every citizen (Nussbaum, 2000: 78–80):

- life
- bodily health
- bodily integrity
- senses, imagination and thought
- emotions
- practical reason
- affiliation
- living in relation to other species
- play
- control over one's political and material environment.

Nussbaum casts this list of human capabilities as set within a version of political liberalism. The capabilities are political goods independent of any particular metaphysical grounding. Her proposal is intended as a partial rather than a comprehensive analysis of the good life – 'a moral conception selected for political purposes only' (Nussbaum, 2000: 77).

Taking the central capabilities as her guide, Nussbaum is reluctant to support state intervention in religious practices. She defends religious traditions and practices as intrinsically valuable, as a means of expressing the capabilities of the senses, the imagination and thought, as well as affiliation. While conceding that religious traditions have been a source of oppression for women, Nussbaum emphasises their role in the promotion of human rights and social justice, as well as their being a source of moral education. Respect for persons requires that fellow citizens be allowed to pursue religious self-determination. While the state has a compelling interest in protecting the central human capabilities, it may only impose a substantial burden on religion when it can demonstrate a compelling interest.

When it comes to the family and the religious upbringing of children, Nussbaum finds greater reason for the state to intervene, where circumstances require. She acknowledges the argument that the family can reproduce gender inequality, as well as the legitimate interest that parents have in raising their children within their religious and other traditions. The state is not only actively present in the family, which its laws help to define. It also has an interest in the development of the capabilities of children, who are its future citizens and do not join the family voluntarily. In this respect the family is significantly different from religious organizations or universities. So Nussbaum recommends that 'the state should give family actors considerable liberty of association and self-definition, but within constraints imposed by the central capabilities' (Nussbaum, 2000: 275). So issues like marital consent, rights in marriage, and child labour are the business of public policy.

Those familiar with Rawls' account of political liberalism may be surprised by Nussbaum's insistence that her approach to the family is based on political liberalism. Nussbaum concedes that her view that the family should be treated differently from religious associations marks a difference between her position and that of Rawls. She writes: 'Rawls' position recommends, in effect, accepting certain groupings as given and not interfering in their internal workings, simply policing them by a system of tough external constraints' (Nussbaum, 2000: 278). And Nussbaum notes that for Rawls the internal distribution of goods in the family, as part of the basic structure of society, is exempt from the requirements of the difference principle.

Yet, Nussbaum insists that although she has argued that the state cannot avoid constituting the family, 'In practical terms, my approach in terms of the promotion of capabilities and Rawls' approach . . . will often lead to the same answers' (Nussbaum 2000: 278). Thus both would support a set of laws including those against marital rape, child labour and child marriage, and those providing for marital consent and nutrition and health of girls. It is just the *grounds* on which they do so that is different, as would be those for their common likelihood of protecting conventional families.

But Nussbaum also points out some other significant differences between her approach and Rawls', such as her consideration of what other affective ties should receive public support. She builds in a significant role for women's collectives, preferring to protect those associations that promote human capabilities rather than customary institutions. She adds that both she and Rawls would oppose types of interference, for example in the division of household tasks – though they would do so for different reasons. Yet Nussbaum's support for various projects is, she admits, a form of interference with traditional ways of sharing decisions in families – beyond what Rawls would accept. Rawls would regard 'as an impermissible interference in the

family structure' the Self-Employed Women's Organization, a non-government organization based in Ahmedabad, which Nussbaum praises for its provision of credit, education and a labour union (Nussbaum, 2000: 281). She also observes that the biggest difference between her approach and Rawls' is on the treatment of girls, and acknowledges that Rawls would be likely to see encouragement of the perception that women are suitable for a variety of different roles as promoting a particular conception of the good.

The differences between Nussbaum and Rawls and the wide range of interventions that Nussbaum supports, highlight more than a half-heartedness about the role of the family on Rawls' part. Nussbaum claims that her capabilities approach also justifies making dowry illegal in India, changing the property laws to give land rights to women, abolishing child marriage, changing the divorce law, combating wage discrimination, working towards the abolition of child labour, and developing hostel programmes to remove girls at risk of child marriage from their homes to provide them with education and training. Not only should all children receive primary and secondary education, but public education should give women skills, information about their options and about means for resisting gender inequality, and 'images of worth and possibility' (Nussbaum, 2000: 288). Programmes to change men's perceptions of their role in the family are endorsed, as are those that foster confidence, initiative and empowerment for women. For Nussbaum, 'it seems quite all right for government to act in ways that aim at changing the social norms that shape the family . . .' (Nussbaum, 2000: 281).

These strategies for intervention amount to wide-ranging intervention by the state and other bodies to change the family and women's place in society, and in turn the comprehensive doctrines that underpin family structures. And while Nussbaum is careful to emphasize the importance of local interpretation and application of the capabilities approach, her proposals embrace a brand of universalism that departs from Rawls' restriction of his political liberalism to one society. For the list of capabilities, being the result of years of discussion involving many voices, represents an overlapping consensus across cultures. While Nussbaum emphasizes that its implementation should be left in the main to internal application within different nations, she makes it clear that under some conditions it may be appropriate for other governments and international agencies to promote the development of human capabilities, by political and economic sanctions if necessary.

Nussbaum proposes promoting public dialogue about norms of sexual equality. This should take place within the framework of the relevant religious codes, also drawing in India's case on a legal framework comprising the constitution and international treaties as well as the capabilities approach. Hence she seems, like Okin, to envisage a form of public debate about prevalent

norms, but one markedly different from the restrained treatment of comprehensive doctrines that is so distinctive of Rawlsian political liberalism.

cultural change, education and liberal feminism

Both Okin and Nussbaum envisage a role for negotiated cultural change in reducing gender inequality. How might cultural change to remove aspects of cultures that discriminate against women work, while retaining substantial elements of the social practices that provide coherence and self-esteem? Let us consider an example that is not fraught with the disagreements about religion that feature in the Okin collection, and about which there has been talk of promoting the kind of change in question.

The South African context is different from the one debated by Okin and her respondents. Here the big issues are not about how to treat minority cultures amongst a liberal majority. Group rights are not at stake; they were rejected in the multi-party negotiations that preceded the transition to democracy in 1994, associated as they were with the white right. Religion is rarely a divisive issue, though race continues to be so. Human rights are prominent in the new democratic constitution, which recognizes the right of citizens to practice their own culture, as well as outlawing discrimination based on gender. Tensions between these last two ideals have stimulated a debate about the future of customary law, confined so far mostly to legal academics. The context for this debate includes ongoing gender inequality in spite of public rhetoric to the contrary, with high levels of violence against women and girls of all ages, together with traditional attitudes that favour their subordination, contributing to catastrophic levels of HIV/AIDS infection.

In the past, many South African women of various groups have suffered discrimination under what is called customary law. The most prominent aspect of customary law, lobola or the payment of bridewealth by a groom to the family of his bride is still widely practised and regarded by many as an important part of their heritage. For critics, lobola perpetuates gender inequality because with it the wife acquires a duty of obedience to her husband (Walker, 1992). There is also some dissatisfaction that for some men lobola is too expensive and has become commercialized, with cash increasingly replacing cattle as the form of payment.

One view of the future of customary law is that much of what remains of it today is the product of prescriptions of colonial and apartheid administrators and collaboration with them by African tribal authorities (Chanock, 1989, 1991). Another is that of Thandabantu Nhlapo, who argues that the continuing recognition of customary law is inevitable in a society whose majority wishes under its new-found self-determination to be governed by a law that

acknowledges their traditions (Nhlapo, 1995: 163). Nhlapo argues that customary law can be modernized to incorporate equal rights for women. I assume that what Nhlapo has in mind is an example of what Okin would call cultural change, and that it is also the kind of debate about norms of sexual inequality that would be encouraged by Nussbaum (see also Parekh, 2000: ch. 7). But how it would work is not clear. Such a process would presumably be expected to involve a free, non-hierarchical discussion involving all affected. Its participants could consider how girls' human capabilities are either fostered or undermined by lobola. Okin's proviso that extra consideration be given to the views of younger women, as those most likely to be affected and to have reservations, could be proposed. But one wonders not only what the chances are of full and free discussion taking place on these terms and on a large enough scale for the outcome to represent a negotiated and coherent change of the practice that wins the support of all, or at least of a significant majority. For the prevailing domination of women would be both the context and the subject of the debate.

I find the idea of a community actually making a unified and coherent decision to alter a customary practice like lobola quite implausible, and cannot think of an example where anything like this, and on the scale imagined, has actually happened. Cultures seem to change in a less deliberate and more unorganized way than Nhlapo and others suggest they could, with practices shifting in unpredicted directions, some falling away but in the absence of a process of decision-making. If this is the case, Okin's more plausible route to the reform of discriminatory traditions is the one in which change comes about when *individuals* decide to exercise their rights not to abide by traditional expectations, though they are more likely to do so if encouraged by public reconsideration of traditions.

The variety of interventions proposed by Okin and Nussbaum are likely to play a part at least in individuals' and small groups' deciding to break with traditions they find oppressive. And while formal schooling is not the particular focus of the texts I have considered, this brings us to what approach a liberal feminist curriculum might take. Giving girls as well as boys sustained and structured access to the perspectives so well articulated by Nussbaum in her discussion of interventions required to change women's skills and society's perceptions of their abilities and place points the way. The liberal feminist education system that this implies would, I suggest, necessarily be a form of comprehensive liberalism, given the interventions required within and across state boundaries and the extent to which they would open up debate on traditional restrictions on the lives of girls and women. But it should not, and does not need to, include the bizarre requirement – we are talking about *liberalism* here – that non-hierarchical autonomy be *enforced*.

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