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Q3(c)

Explain how the slogan 'the personal is political' addresses the issue of women's oppression and discrimination?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · PSIR GS 1 · 15 marks · Political Theory

Political Theory: meaning and approaches.

Core demand of the question

- Locate the slogan in second-wave feminism
- **Show how it politicises the private:** family, sexuality, unpaid work, violence
- Explain how that addresses oppression and discrimination
- Note the debate with liberal public-private splits

Revision summary

The slogan comes from second-wave feminism, famously associated with Carol Hanisch, and treats private injuries as effects of public power.

Liberal theory's public-private split hid unpaid work, domestic violence, and sexual subordination as personal matters.

Millett, **Pateman**, and MacKinnon analysed patriarchy, the sexual contract, and male-standpoint law as political structures.

Once named, those structures can be met by rights, statutes, and a thicker idea of citizenship, as Indian feminist legal struggles show.

The slogan must still make room for intimacy, and for caste and class differences among women, or it becomes another false universal.

Introduction

'The personal is political' is the compact of second-wave feminism. It says that women's oppression is not a string of private misfortunes. It is organised through households, sexuality, law, and the state. **Carol Hanisch**'s 1969 essay gave the phrase its famous form. The theoretical work of **Kate Millett**, **Shulamith Firestone**, **Carole Pateman**, and **Catharine MacKinnon** shows why the slogan is a theory of power, not a mood.

Body

What the slogan refuses

Liberal political theory, from **Locke** onward, split a public of rights and citizenship from a private of family and property. The family was natural, pre-political, or a haven. Discrimination in wages or votes could be named as public injustice. Beating, unpaid care, marital rape, and the silencing of domestic labour were treated as personal, cultural, or unfortunate. The slogan refuses that map. If the state licenses marriage, inheritance, and male headship, the household is already political.

Kate Millett treated patriarchy as power. **Pateman's** sexual contract argued that the social contract presupposed men's access to women's bodies. **MacKinnon** analysed male-standpoint law. The site of injury is intimate; the cause is structural.

How it addresses oppression

Oppression is not only denial of the vote. It is unpaid care, control of fertility, and violence that keeps women out of public space. Consciousness-raising made isolated pain a public pattern, which law can then meet: domestic violence statutes, Vishaka, maternity rights. **Nivedita Menon** shows the slogan must travel across caste, or it becomes a privileged personal.

If everything is political, intimacy dies. Liberal feminists still want a reformed public-private split; socialist feminists add that culture without capitalism is an incomplete diagnosis. The diagnostic force remains: adding women to an unchanged public while leaving the household as a state of nature does not end discrimination.

Flow diagram

Personal is political -> Household and care
Personal is political -> Sexuality and violence
Personal is political -> Law and state
Household and care -> Oppression named
Sexuality and violence -> Oppression named
Oppression named -> Citizenship remade

Conclusion

The personal is political because the private is already organised by public power. Naming family, sexuality, and care as political addresses oppression that equal voting rights left untouched. The task is to democratise those sites without abolishing intimacy, and without forgetting caste and class inside the category 'woman'.

Facts & figures

Hanisch, 1969

'The Personal Is Political' argued that women's consciousness-raising was political analysis, not therapy for private neurosis.

Pateman

The Sexual Contract claims that the liberal social contract presupposed men's political right over women.

Vishaka, 1997

Indian Supreme Court guidelines on workplace sexual harassment treated a 'private' injury as a constitutional equality issue.

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