

# MEMORIAL RESOLUTION SUSAN MOLLER OKIN

(1946-2004)

With the passing of Susan Moller Okin, a leading feminist political theorist and the Martha Sutton Weeks Professor of Ethics in Society, scholars and advocates worldwide lost one of their most creative and talented voices for women. Okin, who revolutionized political philosophy by gendering the concept of justice in both the public and private sphere, died on March 3, 2004 in Lincoln, Massachusetts. She was 57.

Professor Okin was a pioneer who changed traditional conceptions of political philosophy and political theory by focusing on the exclusion of women from most Western political thought. Insisting that women contribute significantly to politics and public life through their work in the home where a sense of ethics and justice are formed, she brought concerns about women into the mainstream of political theory. Gender issues belong at the core, and not the margins, of our theories of justice, she wrote, because as long as women bear most responsibility for the care of the family, social justice can never be fully achieved.

*Women in Western Political Thought* (1979), Okin's first book, examined the works of Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau and Mill to ask "whether the existing traditions of political philosophy can sustain the inclusion of women in its subject matter." Her beautifully reasoned answer in the negative made this an agenda-setting text, which challenged the sharp division between the public realm of citizenship and that of family life.. Her second book, *Justice, Gender and the Family* (1989), which was awarded the American Political Science Association's Victoria Schuck Prize for the best book on women and politics, carried this same question into an examination of contemporary theorists. Her challenge to John Rawl's *Theory of Justice* for failing to take seriously the injustice of the contemporary gendered family became her best-known work. Okin argued that the unequal domestic division of labor negatively effects women's position outside the family. In what became known as "the cycle of vulnerability," Okin explains how "inequalities between the sexes in the workplace and at home reinforce and exacerbate each other." The central idea of this book, Robert Keohane has noted, has "meant more to many people, in their lives, than millions of pages of conventional political science."

But Professor Okin was never satisfied with leaving her mark on political philosophy, which she worried was too removed from the real world. She was deeply disturbed by global inequality and by the prevalence of war, and she fought both with practical passion. Her most recent scholarship on development and human rights, which she pursued in conjunction with her work and travel for the Global Fund for Women (a leading international non-governmental organization supporting women in developing countries), joined a growing chorus of critics arguing that fundamental aspects of development economics need to be re-conceptualized if the well-being of women and children living in poverty is to be successfully promoted. Her last book, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, is a passionate assertion that the constraints women face in different societies cannot be ignored – even in the name of cultural sensitivity – because women are "full human beings to whom a theory of justice must apply."

A native of Auckland, New Zealand, Professor Okin earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Auckland in 1967 a master's degree in philosophy from Oxford University in 1970, and a doctorate in government from Harvard University in 1975. After teaching at the University of Auckland, Vassar, Brandeis and Harvard, Professor Okin joined the Stanford faculty in 1990. She served as director of the Ethics in Society Program from 1993-1996. Professor Okin most recently held a one year fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University.

At Stanford, she taught courses on political philosophy, women's human rights, and women and development. Her strong following among undergraduates was recognized by winning the Bing Teaching Award in 1994 and the Allan V. Cox Medal for Faculty Excellence in fostering Undergraduate Research in 2002. As one student noted: She "inspires us in the pursuit of justice not only by the force of her keen intellect, but also by the way in which she lived and worked." We honor her best in so far as we emulate her dedication to clarity, truth, boldness in thought and her passion for justice.

Committee:  
Terry Lynn Karl  
Debra Satz