

# The Subjection of Women



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN STUART MILL

John Stuart Mill was the son of James Mill, a Scottish philosopher who worked in the fields of history, economics, and political theory. James ensured that his son had a highly rigorous education that included receiving instruction from famous utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham. From an early age, Mill determined that the purpose of his life was to use his education and intellect to help construct a just, happy society. However, at the age of 20, he underwent a crisis when he realized that fulfilling this goal would not bring him personal joy, and he contemplated suicide. He was able to survive this period in part by finding renewed inspiration through the poetry of William Wordsworth. After studying at University College London, Mill embarked on a career as a colonial administrator in India. He defended British imperialism in India but disliked the system of direct rule by the British monarchy, which ultimately led him to return to England. In 1851 he married his close friend of 21 years, Harriet Taylor, after her husband died in 1849. Harriet had a profound influence on Mill's work, including his advocacy of women's rights, as did Mill's stepdaughter, Helen Taylor. In the late 1860s, Mill served as a Liberal Member of Parliament for City and Westminster. As an MP, he campaigned enthusiastically for female suffrage. He died in Avignon, France at the age of 66.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As Mill mentions in the book, at the time he was writing (the mid-19th century), the status of women was undergoing profound change. Divorce had become less prohibitively expensive, more women were publishing their writing, and the women's suffrage movement was gaining momentum. (Although the first law granting suffrage to certain English women would not be passed until 1918.) In general, the 19th century saw a series of reforms that transformed England into a more liberal society. The power of the monarchy and nobility was diminished and there were greater opportunities for social mobility, particularly via the wealth generated by colonialism and the Industrial Revolution. Yet the historical event most frequently cited within *The Subjection of Women* is undoubtedly the abolition of slavery. Britain officially banned the slave trade in 1807 and abolished slavery within its colonies in 1811. Mill most frequently makes reference to the abolition of slavery in the U.S., which happened while he was writing the book in 1865. However, while Mill tends to discuss slavery as a concept that is firmly in the past, in reality there were still several countries—such as Cuba and Brazil—that had not yet abolished

slavery at the time he was writing. This is important, as Mill's framing of slavery as something that was widely condemned at the time he was writing is historically accurate.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*The Subjection of Women* is an early predecessor of feminist philosophy, but it was far from the first of its kind. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published [A Vindication of the Rights of Woman](#), a text that argued in favor of women's human rights (without necessarily going so far as to assert that men and women were truly equal). Mill's own wife, Harriet Taylor Mill—with whom he collaborated on *The Subjection of Women* as well as other works—published an essay in 1851 entitled "The Enfranchisement of Women" which contains many similar arguments to those Mill makes. Later, in 1858, the formerly enslaved abolitionist Sojourner Truth gave a speech entitled "Ain't I a Woman?" that is considered to be one of the most important early predecessors of Black feminist theory.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Subjection of Women
- **When Written:** 1851–1869
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1869
- **Literary Period:** Victorian
- **Genre:** Political Essay
- **Point of View:** First Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Team Effort.** In his autobiography, Mill notes that parts of *The Subjection of Women* were inspired by his stepdaughter, Helen Taylor. He also stated that "all that is most striking and profound in what was written by me belongs to my wife."

**Object of Ridicule.** *The Subjection of Women* was controversial when it was published, and many people mocked Mill for championing women's rights. In an 1873 issue of *Vanity Fair*, for example, the cartoonist Leslie Ward (known as "Spy") drew a caricature of Mill entitled "A Feminine Philosopher."



## PLOT SUMMARY

In *The Subjection of Women*, John Stuart Mill argues both that the current state of gender inequality is inherently wrong and that it is prohibiting human flourishing. Instead of men holding disproportionate privilege and power, men and women should

be entirely equal. Mill laments the fact that the unequal system currently in place was not decided upon via a process of rational deliberation, but instead emerged from the “law of the strongest” that favored those with the most physical strength. A modern, fair society should move away from this cruel system and institute structures that will best support the prosperity of all people.

People often justify gender inequality by arguing that it reflects human nature—but the same thing was once said of **slavery**, which is now widely understood to be a brutal, abhorrent institution. Others argue that women freely consent to being ruled by men, yet this isn’t actually true either. Many women express their displeasure at their subjugation, including those across the world who are currently fighting for the right to vote. The other problem is that men generally do not wish to feel that they are oppressing women, and thus they indoctrinate women into believing (or behaving like) they welcome their oppression.

In modern Europe, it is now agreed upon that the best way to organize society is through the principles of individual freedom and competitive meritocracy. This allows people to engage in those pursuits that they enjoy and excel at, while preventing people from performing roles in which they are incompetent. Because no one was raised outside of society, it is impossible to know for sure which gendered characteristics are biological and which are produced by social conditions. Furthermore, the extreme power differential makes it difficult for men to truly understand women. People claim that a woman’s natural role is to be a wife and mother—but if this were really true, women wouldn’t need to be coerced into devoting their lives to this role and nothing else.

Mill argues that married women are essentially enslaved to their husbands, who hold absolute power over them. Women cannot own property of their own and even if their husband dies they cannot legally be considered the guardian of their own children. For a long time, divorce was either nonexistent or prohibitively expensive, which meant that once women married, their tie to their husbands was inescapable. Men do not have to prove themselves qualified or worthy of having power over women and indeed often abuse this power. Some might say that just as people need a government to efficiently make decisions for them, each **family** needs a leader. In reality, however, the family is a site of despotism, and people should be just as worried about this as they are about political despotism. If the family was structured differently, it could instead be an institution that taught people the values of individual freedom, autonomy, dignity, and equality.

Mill thinks that the real reason why women continue to face so much discrimination in the public sphere is because most men are unwilling to view women as equals. The result is that many posts go to men who are less competent than a woman would be at performing the role. But in a competitive meritocracy, it

wouldn’t be necessary to prove in advance that women could succeed in a particular position—if she was able to attain the position, she would already have proved that she could succeed in it. If women seem less intelligent or skilled than men, it is surely due to their lack of education rather than natural deficiencies. Figures from history such as Queen Elizabeth I or Joan of Arc show that women are more than capable of political rule, which implies they should also be capable of much less weighty roles too.

Next, Mill acknowledges that women are famed for their strong intuition, and he proposes that this is because they are comparatively uneducated and thus must rely on instinct more than acquired knowledge. Negative stereotypes about women—such as their nervousness and fragility—are likely caused by the restrictive, unhealthy conditions in which they are forced to live. Currently, women have little time or resources to devote to pursuits of their own choosing, which is part of why there have been so few female geniuses in the fields of philosophy, science, or art. When women try to publish their writing, they usually have to do so with a man’s help, and the result is often that the man in question takes (or is given) sole credit for their ideas.

Neither men nor women frequently complain about the existing way of things—and when women do complain, they do not place blame on men. However, this may be because the consequences of doing so would be too great. Men need to join the fight for gender equality because women risk too much by engaging in the battle without male support. As well as improving the conditions of women themselves, ending gender equality would spark a positive transformation in society as a whole. Currently, the existence of gendered oppression warps society and particularly the vitally important principles of justice and equality on which morality should be based.

Although women have faced significant restrictions, they have still managed to make significant contributions to society—albeit often in covert ways. At the same time, not all of these contributions are necessarily positive. For example, Mill believes it is a shame that women tend to usually fall on the side of convention and rebuke their husbands for being politically radical. If women received better education and had more power in society, they would likely become more imaginative. They would also be better partners for their husbands, challenging them instead of holding them back. Without gender oppression, marriage might become more similar to a friendship between two people of the same sex, wherein both parties can disagree but enrich each other through that disagreement. The ideal marriage would be one between true equals, although Mill knows that for many people, this is hard to even imagine.

Overall, the insult to individual freedom and autonomy constituted by gendered oppression is a major blight on society that is preventing human flourishing. For this reason, it must be

eradicated.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**John Stuart Mill** – John Stuart Mill is the author of *The Subjection of Women*. Mill was a 19th-century British philosopher, economist, and political theorist. One of the most important figures in the history of classical liberal thought, Mill placed great emphasis on the importance of individual liberty. He denounced all forms of political tyranny, which he claimed posed a serious threat to human flourishing. These views are strongly represented in *The Subjection of Women*, which holds that the absolute power men hold over women (particularly that of husbands over their wives) should be just as strongly condemned as political despotism. Mill was profoundly influenced by his own wife, Harriet Taylor Mill, with whom he collaborated on many works, including *The Subjection of Women* and his most famous work, *On Liberty*. Mill was also inspired by his stepdaughter Helen, who was an avidly campaigned for women's rights. As a Member of Parliament for City and Westminster, Mill fought for women's suffrage, a cause that he makes a passionate case for in *The Subjection of Women*. He also championed various other liberal reforms and, following the abolition of **slavery** in the U.S., argued that free Black people should be granted full and equal rights under the law.

**Harriet Taylor Mill** – Harriet Taylor Mill was John Stuart Mill's wife and the coauthor of many of his most important works, including *On Liberty* and (at least to some extent) *The Subjection of Women*. Harriet published her own essay about women's rights, *The Enfranchisement of Women*, in 1851, along with a number of other works. John Stuart Mill credits her as being a profound influence on his thought.

### MINOR CHARACTERS

**Helen Taylor** – Helen Taylor was Harriet Taylor Mill's daughter and John Stuart Mill's stepdaughter, although Mills refers to her simply as his daughter. Like her parents, Helen was a passionate campaigner for women's rights. John Stuart Mill credits her as influencing the composition of *The Subjection of Women*.

**Queen Elizabeth I** – Queen Elizabeth I was the Tudor queen of England and Ireland from 1558–1603. She was renowned as a fiercely intelligent, independent, and powerful ruler; Mill cites her as an example of women's leadership capabilities.

**Joan of Arc** – Joan of Arc was a 15th-century French peasant who fought against the English in the Hundred Years' War before being captured and executed at 19 years old. Mill cites her as another example of a woman who became famous for her extraordinary abilities.



## THEMES

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### LIBERALISM AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

John Stuart Mill is one of the most significant figures in the history of classical liberal thought, and the argument he makes about women's rights in *The Subjection of Women* is deeply rooted in liberal values of freedom, individualism, choice, and consent. Mill denounces the restrictions placed on women's freedom and argues that gender equality is essential to modern liberal democracy. He successfully proves that liberalism must include women's rights by arguing that it is hypocritical and contradictory to cherish individual rights and freedoms while only allocating those rights and freedoms to a subsection of the population (men).

While Mill anticipates skepticism among readers about the issue of gender equality, he presupposes that they might be more sympathetic to the importance of liberal values in general. He specifically appeals to the liberal concepts of freedom, equality, and individualism to persuade the reader that women should have the same rights and freedoms granted to men. One of the principles that Mill emphasizes in *The Subjection of Women* is meritocracy: before the advancement of liberal ideals, the position a person was born into usually dictated the role they had in life. For example, the son of a peasant would be a peasant, while the son of a lord would be a lord. Liberalism, however, asserts that the social position a person was born into shouldn't limit what they can achieve. Mill acknowledges that different people have different capabilities, but he argues that "[...] freedom of individual choice is now known to be the only thing which procures the adoption of the best processes, and throws each operation into the hands of those who are best qualified for it." This means that it is best for everyone if every professional or political position is open to all, as this will give the best chance that it is given to the most-qualified candidate. Mill then explains, "[...] we ought [...] not to ordain that to be born a girl instead of a boy, any more than to be born black instead of white, or a commoner instead of a nobleman, shall decide the person's position through all life." If people accept that principles of meritocracy and individual choice are best for society, then surely this should apply to women as well.

Another liberal principle that Mill emphasizes is that of consent. He argues that if women are to be free, this doesn't just mean that they are not prevented from doing things—it also means they should not be forced to do anything they do not want to do. He writes that until "a late period in European

history,” women were often forced into marriage. Even though the church technically required a woman’s consent to marry, there was little care given to checking whether this was true consent or if she had been coerced. Once married, husbands had total control of their wives; women had no legal rights. Mill denounces this system as a violation of women’s inherent rights as individuals. He also argues that it creates a system of “despotism” within the **family** that mirrors political tyranny—and readers are likely to agree that totalitarian rule is bad. In this way, Mill helps persuade readers that broader social and political problems are partially rooted in the oppression of women, and that gender equality would therefore create a better society.

By drawing a connection between liberal principles and women’s rights, Mill makes his argument more appealing to those who might be skeptical about women’s rights. However, at the same time, he makes his argument vulnerable to criticisms of liberalism itself and its applicability to the issue of gender. For example, Mill’s arguments about meritocracy emphasize that women who are talented and intelligent should be entitled to the same positions as men. However, one could argue that this argument favors upper-class white women, who—like upper-class white men—are more likely to have access to education and networks that allow them to gain access to power. Moreover, some might argue that Mill’s consideration of the way in which women are prevented from exercising the liberal values of freedom, choice, and consent ignores the way in which gender *also* restricts men’s autonomy. At the time Mill was writing, men were prevented from devoting their lives to parenthood and domesticity, as these were considered firmly in the domain of womanhood and inappropriate for men. One could argue that in a truly liberal society, it would be just as important for men to feel free to engage in “feminine” activities as it would be for women to be able to enter the workforce and hold political power. There is perhaps an extent to which Mill exercises the same hypocrisy that he accuses others of by not seeing how men’s rights and freedoms are also restricted on account of their gender.

Overall, Mill argues that a liberal society that oppresses women is not really liberal at all. Not only is it hypocritical and thus morally unjust to extend liberal values only to men, but doing so negatively impacts society, as it prevents women from realizing their potential and making positive contributions to the world. It is on these terms that Mill proves that any modern, liberal society must support the individual rights and freedoms of women.



## GENDER EQUALITY FOR THE GREATER GOOD

In *The Subjection of Women*, Mill gives several reasons why it is *inherently* wrong to oppress women, but he also gives a utilitarian argument for gender

equality, meaning that he makes a case as to why enhancing women’s rights will benefit society as a whole. This means that it is not only in the interest of women to support gender equality, but of men too. Through focusing on the broader benefits to society that gender equality would bring, Mill rejects the notion that gender equality is a matter of pitting men against women and asserts that women’s rights are essential to the civilization’s overall advancement.

Mill’s main argument about how gender equality would benefit everyone consists in the fact that when women’s rights are restricted, women are not able to properly use their intelligence and talents in order to contribute to society. He points out that for much of European history, women have been prevented from receiving an education, barred from most jobs, and confined to the domestic sphere. At the time he is writing, this is just beginning to change, and he argues that this change will ultimately come to aid “human improvement.” In presenting his account of why gender equality would improve human society, Mill draws on the utilitarian assumption that society should be organized in a manner that benefits most people. He argues that not only would gender equality benefit the half of the world’s population who are themselves women, but many men would benefit as well, because letting women fully contribute to society would enhance life for everyone. He points out that allowing women to be able to freely choose their occupation based on their ability would “doubl[e] the mass of mental faculties available for the higher service of humanity.” When women’s rights are restricted, much of human skill is completely wasted, which holds back the advancement of the species. Such wastefulness is inefficient and needlessly harmful—the opposite of a utilitarian way of organizing society.

Mill is aware that many people believe that women are not as intelligent or capable as men and thus that restricting women’s roles does not harm society, as women have little contribute. He critiques this idea by pointing out that there is little evidence to suggest that women are inherently less intelligent or capable and men. Women are only *perceived* as less capable because they do not have the same opportunities and resources as men. Indeed, he points out that in rare situations when women have been afforded an education and/or given access to power, they have proved themselves to be highly competent. He argues that Queen Elizabeth I, for example, “showed herself equal to the greatest.”

In arguing that gender equality is a matter of the greater good, Mill does not just claim that women’s rights will lead to better outcomes for everyone; he also argues that gender oppression is the cause of many societal problems presumed to have nothing to do with gender. For example, the fact that there are such extreme power imbalances between men and women within the **family** is directly connected to the power imbalances that exist in society at large: “The family is a school of despotism, in which the virtues of despotism, but also its

vices, are largely nourished.” Mill argues that men learn to wield disproportionate power and authority within their family homes and then go on to do the same in the wider world, which often has negative results. Although he acknowledges that despotism might have some “virtues,” as a liberal philosopher, he believes that power should be assigned to the most capable and that no one should have absolute power over anyone else—ideas that he repeats throughout the book.

At times, Mill’s argument about how gender oppression is the source of broader societal harms gets quite radical—both for the context in which he was writing and even perhaps for the present. At one point he claims, “All the selfish propensities, the self-worship, the unjust self-preference, which exist among making, have their source and root in, and derive their principle nourishment from, the present constitution of the relation between men and women.” Many might find themselves disagreeing with the idea that *all* the selfishness that exists in society has its root cause in gender relations. (What about other factors, such as racism or financial greed?) Mill doesn’t back up this particular claim, but by making such a strong point about the role sexism plays in harming society at large, he nevertheless convincingly demonstrates that promoting gender equality is in service of the greater good.



### BIOLOGICAL VS. SOCIAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF GENDER

In *The Subjection of Women*, Mill argues that many of the characteristics people claim are a biologically

essential part of being female may actually be generated by social conditions. He dismisses the ideas that “feminine” characteristics such as submissiveness, fragility, tenderness, and self-sacrifice have their roots in biology. Distinguishing between the biological and social differences that exist between men and women is a fraught topic within the entire history of the fight for gender equality, in part because it is difficult to know for certain what’s biological or “natural” given that every person is influenced by their social environment. Mill argues that until women are treated equally to men, there will be no way of knowing what (if any) characteristics are biologically female and what are simply a matter of social conditioning. He uses this idea to support his overall argument that women’s rights should be promoted in order to aid the advancement of human knowledge and civilization.

Mill examines a variety of claims about women’s supposedly “natural” state—which hold that women are less authoritative, intelligent, and rational than men—suggesting that it might be erroneous to believe that these traits are biologically based. Mill critiques scientific ideas that assert that there are strong biological distinctions between men and women, such as the belief that women have a naturally fragile disposition. This might seem like a biological characteristic, but it is in fact because upper-class English women are raised like “hot-house

plants,” totally shielded from the outside world. Mill points out that “women brought up to work for their livelihood show none of these morbid characteristics [...] Women who in their early years have shared in the healthful physical education and bodily freedom of their brothers, and who obtain a sufficiency of pure air and exercise in after-life, very rarely have any excessive susceptibility of nerves which can disqualify them from active pursuits.” If upper-class women were encouraged to spend more time outside and allowed to participate more in public life, employment, and sports, then it would likely become clear that women do not have naturally nervous dispositions at all. Because Mill holds that differences between men and women are generally not based in biology, he suggests that if social conditions were to change, these differences would disappear. He argues, “It is by no means established that the brain of a woman is smaller than that of a man.” (Contemporary scientific knowledge has proven Mill correct on this front.) Mill also explains that social factors create the illusion that a particular trait is natural, when in fact if social conditions changed, so would the trait. Overall, he ends up coming to the conclusion that—while it was not yet possible in his time period to know for sure—women are almost certainly no less intelligent than men. If they ever seem so, it is likely due to their restricted access to education and the public sphere.

Mill also identifies a logical flaw in the way that supposedly biological female characteristics are used to justify social restrictions placed on women, pointing out that if these characteristics were really biological, then social restrictions wouldn’t be necessary. If women were not capable of performing an activity, Mill explains, then there would be no reason for banning them from it. The ban itself suggests that men have other reasons for wanting women to not engage in a particular activity and wish to create the illusion that women are not capable, when in fact they are simply not allowed. The example Mill gives of this phenomenon is when men claim that women can’t participate in the workforce, because “the natural vocation of a woman is that of a wife and mother.” However, the reality is that women are *forced* into the domestic sphere because their other options are severely limited, which implies it isn’t a “natural” role at all. Mill even goes so far to suggest that men have an underlying fear that if women were not compelled to marry and have children, too few of them would actively choose to do so, and human reproduction would be threatened.

Another key part of Mill’s argument about the difference between biological and social characteristics is his suggestion that everything that is common and familiar to humans *feels* natural, but that doesn’t mean it actually *is* natural. “The subjection of women to men being a universal custom, any departure from it quite naturally appears unnatural,” he writes. “But was there ever any domination which did not appear natural to those who possessed it?” It is only by taking active steps to change familiar social customs that humanity will ever

be able to figure out what is natural and what isn't. This is why it is essential that society shift from gender oppression to gender equality—until such a shift happens, little can be known about the difference between social and biological understandings of gender. And thus, false stereotypes about women will continue to abound.

Finally, Mill asserts that even if it is true that certain female characteristics are proven to be biological and not the result of social conditions, it wouldn't matter much anyway. This is because, in modern English society, biology doesn't play a major role in determining what life is like. He argues: "Both in a good and a bad sense, the English are farther from a state of nature than any other modern people. They are, more than any other people, a product of civilization and discipline." This means that even where there are biological differences between men and women (such as men's greater physical strength), it doesn't matter, because these natural characteristics don't have a major impact on modern life. Civilization has overcome the dictates of nature, which means that facts such as women's comparative physical weakness should not prevent them from fully participating in public life and having equal rights to men.



### INTELLIGENCE, REASON, AND DEBATE

Although *The Subjection of Women* covers the issue of women's rights in general, Mill is particularly interested in the issues of women's intellect and

rational capacity. He notes that women are intelligent and reasonable enough to advocate for themselves, but because they are often prevented from advocating for themselves in the public sphere, he will join the debate in support of women's rights. Furthermore, he acknowledges that women's restricted access to education may make them seem less intelligent, but this isn't actually the case. By persuasively demonstrating that women are just as intelligent and rational as men, Mill makes a compelling case that women should be allowed to vote, hold political office, and make contributions to art and knowledge.

One of the reasons why Mill places such emphasis on intelligence and reason is because, as he illustrates in the book, women's supposed intellectual inferiority is a commonly cited reason for why they are afforded fewer rights than men. Mill rejects the idea that women are less intelligent than men, arguing that people are becoming increasingly aware that such a notion is a myth. He suggests that one of the reasons why this myth has persisted for so long is because "the generality of the male sex cannot yet tolerate the idea of living with an equal." They have ignored the evident reality that women are just as intelligent as men because they don't want it to be true. The problem is not women's lack of intelligence, but men's selfishness, stubbornness, and willful ignorance. Mill gives several other convincing reasons why the myth that women are less intelligent has been allowed to persist—the most significant of which is that women are prevented from

accessing the same educational opportunities as men. Yet even the few women who do manage to get an education face further obstacles. For example, Mill points out that women are not able to present their views properly because the risk of upsetting men (who have almost total control over the public sphere and the terms of the debate) is too great. "As yet very few of them [women] dare tell anything, which men, on whom their literary success depends, are unwilling to hear." The result of this hesitancy means that people can continue to claim that women are passive, unintelligent, and that they even enjoy being subjugated by men. Mill notes, however, that more women are now steadily expressing objections to their second-class status: "Ever since there have been women able to make their sentiments known by their writings (the only mode of publicity which society permits to them), an increasing number of them have recorded protests against their present social condition." Again, Mill notes that while there is far less written evidence that women dislike their subjugation than there would be if women had more resources and opportunities, he emphasizes that the fact that such evidence exists at all highlights that women are intelligent, rational, and capable of debate. According to his logic, this means that women are also worthy of equal rights. There is also a personal element to Mill's discussion of women's access to expression and debate, as he admits that much of *The Subjection of Women* was influenced by his late wife, Harriet Taylor, and his stepdaughter, Helen Taylor. By drawing attention to the role that Harriet and Helen played in shaping his argument, Mill further proves that women are both intellectually capable and determined to fight for their own rights—even if they have to resort to indirect means to do so.

While Mill presents a convincing case that women are just as intelligent and rational as men, his focus on this issue could be seen as misguided. Although in the historical and political context in which he was writing it was very common to assert that a person's intellectual capabilities should determine what rights, freedoms, and resources they were allocated, some would argue that human rights and freedoms should not depend on intelligence and reason in the first place. Indeed, as Mill himself points out, men do not have to pass any test that determines they are intellectually "fit" enough to wield power over women—they are given this power regardless. This becomes a problem given that men are the ones who get to determine what intelligence and reason looks like in others. Furthermore, through his heavy focus on reason, Mill could be accused of disproportionately focusing on women from a similar class position to himself—highly-educated, wealthy, and elite. Overall, Mill is highly effective in showing that women are no less intelligent and rational than men and that if anything, the fact that men claim otherwise highlights their own bias and ignorance. While some might claim that this focus on intelligence and reason is somewhat elitist, the reverse could also be argued. By asking readers to second-guess their

suppositions about women's supposed mental inferiority, Mill arguably encourages a more open-minded view of intelligence that is part of a general movement toward respecting the thoughts and opinions of all people.



## WOMANHOOD AS SLAVERY

The most important symbol in *The Subjection of Women* is undoubtedly **slavery**, which Mill uses as a metaphor for the condition of women at the time

he is writing. Throughout the book, Mill describes women as existing in a state of “bondage” to men, who act as their “masters.” He emphasizes that women have so few legal rights that they end up effectively enslaved to their husbands, who wield absolute authority and control over them. In using slavery as a metaphor, Mill draws on the momentum of the abolitionist movement. (Importantly, the book was published in 1869, 58 years after slavery was abolished in the British colonies and four years after it was abolished in the U.S.). Mill posits slavery as a phenomenon that is self-evidently wrong, and by comparing womanhood to enslavement, he aims to horrify the reader and convince them to end the injustice of gender oppression.

Understanding Mill's use of slavery as a metaphor requires some historical context, which shows why he believes that comparing womanhood to slavery will convince readers that gender inequality needs to be ended urgently. Mill works on the assumption that slavery is a wrong, yet it is still a familiar aspect of the world at the time he is writing. Indeed, at this point in time, the abolitionist movement had a lot of momentum, driven by an increasing number of successes across the world. Mill seeks to use this momentum in service of his argument for women's rights. Mill assumes that his reader will find slavery an abhorrent part of the past that has no place in the modern world. He then suggests that although the reader might not realize it, slavery and gender inequality are closely paralleled—which means that gender inequality should have no place in the modern world either. Mill's argument that womanhood is a form of slavery rests on the fact that at the time he is writing, women have few legal rights and freedoms. As he claims, “The wife is the actual bondservant of her husband: not less so, as far as legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so called.” One of the main pieces of evidence he uses to support this is the fact that women could not own property. After mentioning that any property a woman possesses automatically becomes owned by her husband, Mill states: “In this respect the wife's position under the common law of England is worse than that of slaves in the laws of many countries.” This is one of several points in the book wherein Mill makes the claim that in some ways womanhood is even worse than slavery.

While Mill maintains that white women have fewer legal rights than enslaved people, he considers the fact that they generally

face better social conditions—yet he ultimately refutes even this. He writes: “I am far from pretending that wives are in general no better treated than slaves; but no slave is a slave to the same lengths, and in so full sense of the word, as a wife is.” Here, he admits that women might generally be treated better than enslaved people, but adds that women might still be worse off because their “enslavement” is so totalizing and inescapable. Mill goes on to argue that while slaves shed their enslaved status when they stop working, women face the difficulty of being “wives” 24 hours a day. In this way, he claims that while the condition of white women's lives are better than those of an enslaved person, white women face a worse problem in that they can never escape their degraded status as wives.

In arguing that the inescapable aspect of women's status as wives makes womanhood a form of slavery, Mill draws attention to the problem of the intimate and pervasive nature of gender oppression. Foreshadowing the arguments of later feminists in the second half of the 20th century, Mill notes that it is particularly difficult to have to live alongside one's oppressor and exist in a romantic relationship with them. This can mean that women are especially trapped within their degraded status—a state made even worse by the fact that women are largely confined to the domestic sphere and prohibited from participating in public life. At the same time, Mill's use of the slavery metaphor is arguably flawed due to the fact that it betrays a misunderstanding of the reality of slavery. It is certainly not true that enslaved people could escape their slave status at the end of the work day. Moreover, his argument that enslaved people had better rights than women because they could own property does not apply to the institution of transatlantic slavery, which held that enslaved people were *themselves* property. However, perhaps the most serious problem with Mill's use of the slavery metaphor is the fact that in comparing women and slaves, it ignores the reality that half of enslaved people were women—women who faced a unique burden of oppression, not just as slaves *and* as women, but as enslaved women in particular.

Mill's claim that womanhood was a form of slavery may have shocked many of his readers into taking gender inequality more seriously by leveraging the enthusiastic horror people felt at slavery at the time he was writing. Many of his readers would have felt shame and regret that their society so recently participated in the institution of slavery and Mill uses these feelings in order to change people's minds about gender. In using the metaphor of slavery, he effectively shows how women's lack of legal rights has a profoundly dehumanizing effect, leaving women at the mercy of men who—like enslavers—have license to be cruel and unjust without consequences. At the same time, the way Mill uses the metaphor is not always historically inaccurate, and it excludes enslaved women from Mill's vision of women's rights.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## SLAVERY

Mill uses the symbol of slavery to invoke horror at the status of women as well as to demonstrate all that is harmful about inequality and tyranny. He argues that womanhood is a kind of slavery, at times even going so far as to say that women are more enslaved than actual slaves are. He justifies this by pointing out that women have few human rights and are at the total mercy of their husbands, who can treat them however cruelly they wish. Furthermore, because men don't want to feel as if they are oppressing women, they "enslave" women's minds in order to convince them that they actually want to exist in a state of subjugation.

Because so much of Mill's argument rests on the importance of individual freedom, autonomy, and dignity, slavery comes to represent everything that is the opposite of what Mill values as good. Slavery is defined by extreme inequality; authoritarian control; and, of course, lack of freedom. As a result, it represents everything that Mill abhors and seeks to erase from society. In this sense, it is important to remember that slavery operates more as a symbol in the book than it does a reference to the real historical institution that had only recently been abolished in the U.S. and British Empire at the time Mill was writing. Slavery comes to represent everything that is wrong about the ways in which women are treated and—in a broader sense—everything that is holding society back from flourishing. While treating slavery as a symbol more than a historical reality arguably presents some problems for Mill's argument, it is nonetheless strongly underlines the point he makes about the importance of individual rights and liberties.



## THE FAMILY

Mill frames the family as both a small-scale representation of society and the key site of women's oppression. This is not to say that every individual family is either of these things, but rather that the family as a social institution—a unit that is structured according to social norms—symbolizes the power relations of society at large, including gender inequality. Mill draws parallel between how social dynamics operate in the family and how they do in society, most crucially when he claims that there is a parallel between political despotism (totalitarian or tyrannical authority) and despotism within the family.

Ultimately, Mill ends up claiming that the family is not just a parallel of the political problems that exist in society at large, but the major *cause* of these problems. He believes that men

learn how to exercise excessive power through wielding too much control over their wives, and that children internalize the existence of unjust hierarchies through watching the dynamic between their parents. In this way, the family structure symbolizes the social hierarchies that reinforce inequality in wider society. For this reason, Mill argues that the family needs to be redesigned in order to promote the "virtues of freedom." Men and women should share decision-making equally and women should be allowed to participate in the public sphere rather than being confined to their roles as wives and mothers. If such changes were to take place within the family, Mill argues, society as a whole would be transformed for the better.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *On Liberty and the Subjection of Women* published in 2007.

## Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ [...] the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement, and [...] it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 133

## Explanation and Analysis

This quotation, which occurs at the very beginning of *The Subjection of Women*, outlines the main argument Mill will make. He is making the case for women's rights not only because gender inequality is wrong in itself, but because it also holds society back and prohibits human flourishing. For this reason, Mill recommends not just a decrease in discrimination, but a total overhaul wherein men and women are treated as exact equals. (Note that the word "disability" does not refer to physical impairments but rather the discriminatory practices and restrictions placed on women.)

Particularly given the context in which he is writing, this argument is quite radical. One might expect Mill to suggest a series of gradual changes and perhaps to slowly ease the reader into the argument. Instead, he immediately declares that women's oppression is unacceptable and that it must



be replaced by *full* equality.

This quotation also introduces the two main methods of justification that Mill uses for his argument. On one hand, he argues that the oppression of women is *inherently* wrong (as he will explain later, this is because it violates the individual rights and freedoms of women). Yet he also makes a utilitarian argument against women's oppression, arguing that because gender inequality is one of the main obstacles to human flourishing, eradicating it will significantly improve society.

☛ In the first place, the opinion in favour of the present system, which entirely subordinates the weaker sex to the stronger, rests upon theory only; for there never has been trial made of any other: so that experience, in the sense in which it is vulgarly opposed to theory, cannot be pretended to have pronounced any verdict. And in the second place, the adoption of this system of inequality never was the result of deliberation, or forethought, or any social ideas, or any notion whatever of what conduced to the benefit of humanity or the good order of society. It arose simply from the fact that from the very earliest twilight of human society, every woman (owing to the value attached to her by men, combined with her inferiority in muscular strength) was found in a state of bondage to some man.

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 137

### Explanation and Analysis



In the introductory section of *The Subjection of Women*, Mill explains that he will use the essay to argue that men and women should be equal, because this would benefit society as a whole. He acknowledges that this is a difficult case to make considering that the vast majority of people accept that women's subordination to men as right or at least inevitable. In this passage, he points out that the current system of gender inequality is the only system that has ever been tried and also that it was not decided upon via a process of debate. Instead, it emerged out of the basic biological fact that men tend to be physically stronger than women.

As a philosopher, Mill places great importance on debate and rational decision-making as the best means to creating a free, fair, and functional world for everyone. He rejects the

conservative idea that keeping things the way they've always been is necessarily a good thing. Instead, he argues that only through discussion and experimentation will people be able to work out the best way to organize society.

☛ But was there ever any domination which did not appear natural to those who possessed it? There was a time when the division of mankind into two classes, a small one of masters and a numerous one of slaves, appeared, even to the most cultivated minds, to be a natural, and the only natural, condition of the human race.

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 144

### Explanation and Analysis


Mill has noted that primitive human society was dominated by the "law of force," meaning that whoever had the most physical strength and resources had social power over others. He then discussed different systems of unjust authority that endured in the modern world, such as slavery and the monarchy, and argued that gender inequality is another example of one of these unjust systems. He anticipates an objection that, whereas slavery and the monarchy are arbitrary social constructs, gender inequality is "natural." However, in this quotation, he retorts that gender inequality only *seems* natural because any system of power seems natural to those it favors. In the second part of the quotation, Mill again returns to the example of slavery, arguing that while slavery was in place it seemed a natural, inevitable, and permanent way of organizing human society.

Here, Mill effectively shows that systems can seem "natural" just because they have been in place for a long time, are widely supported, and/or confer advantages to a particular group. In reality, though, this is misleading. Mill suggests that it only became clear that slavery wasn't "natural" when slavery ended. This implies that it is impossible to tell if a system is "natural" while it is currently in place, and that this should not be used as a justification for a given system. Moreover, it suggests that—like slavery—gender inequality could soon end, as well.

☛ All causes, social and natural, combine to make it unlikely that women should be collectively rebellious to the power of men. They are so far in a position different from all other subject classes, that their masters require something more from them than actual service. Men do not want solely the obedience of women, they want their sentiments. All men, except the most brutish, desire to have, in the woman most nearly connected with them, not a forced slave but a willing one, not a slave merely, but a favourite. They have therefore put everything in practice to enslave their minds.

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 148

### Explanation and Analysis

Mill has imagined that upon hearing his argument in favor of gender equality, some people will claim that women freely consent to their inferior status. He denies this on several grounds: first, he points out that whenever women have been allowed to do so, they've have published writing objecting to their oppressed status. Moreover, women all over the world are fighting for their rights at the time he is writing (the mid-19th century). In this quotation, he turns his attention to why it may seem as if women consent to their oppression—and he argues that this consent is not, in fact, given freely. Mill explains that most men want to believe that women enjoy being dominated and controlled by men. They therefore work to indoctrinate women into accepting or even treasuring their own oppression.

Mill's analysis here helps show why gender inequality is such a complex and stubborn issue. He points out that women are oppressed not only by having few legal rights and opportunities to gain financial independence, but also due to psychological indoctrination. Gender oppression is thus enforced by love and intimacy as much as it is by deprivation, violence, and other forms of physical domination. This point foreshadows the arguments that would be made by second-wave feminists in the latter half of the 20th century, who argued that mainstream cultural messages about romance often persuaded women to accept maltreatment and second-class status.

☛ Many a man thinks he perfectly understands women, because he has had amatory relations with several, perhaps with many of them.

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 157

### Explanation and Analysis

Mill has made the case that it is impossible to base an argument in favor of the current system of gender inequality on the idea that it reflects men and women's natural characters. In reality, very little is known about the "natural" differences between men and women. Many—perhaps most—of the gender characteristics deemed to be natural could actually be purely the result of social conditions. Moreover, research into this matter has been held back by the fact that women have generally not been able to participate. In this short quotation, Mill describes the arrogance of men who believe they "perfectly understand" women simply because they have had relationships with them.

Given that Mill has already outlined how men pressure women into acting like they embrace their oppression—a phenomenon that he describes as a form of indoctrination—it is easy to see how men convince themselves that they understand women when, really, this isn't the case. Men may think that they have learned what women are really like through their intimate relationships, but in reality, the way women behave around them is something of a performance. As Mill has already noted, the system of gender inequality encourages women to believe that their life's purpose is to be attractive to men. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the way they behave toward men does not represent their true nature but rather what they believe men will find appealing.

☛ It is but of yesterday that women have either been qualified by literary accomplishments, or permitted by society, to tell anything to the general public. As yet very few of them dare tell anything, which men, on whom their literary success depends, are unwilling to hear.

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 159

### Explanation and Analysis

Mill has reflected on how difficult it is for men to

understand women, even (and especially) their own wives. Women's relative powerlessness means that they cannot afford to risk upsetting their husbands, and thus the way they behave around their husbands is unlikely to represent the full truth of who they are. In this quotation, Mill observes that the problem extends into written expression too. He notes that women have only recently been allowed to publish their writing at all, and—in part due to the newness of this societal shift—they tend to be very careful about what they say.

In this passage, then, Mill effectively demonstrates a parallel between the emotional pressures that affect women's behavior within romantic relationships and similar pressures that occur in public life. Clearly, the emotional dynamics of a marriage are different to the considerations writers make while considering what to publish; however, Mill points out that within a system of gender inequality, there are important parallels between the two. In both cases, women's flourishing is dependent upon male approval. If a wife says something or a woman writes something that men dislike, there will almost certainly be negative consequences, because men wield disproportionate power within both marriage and the literary marketplace. As a result, women are rarely able to properly speak their minds.



Mill presents a new argument for why women shouldn't be restricted from political and professional roles, opportunities, and pursuits. He believes that in a liberal society, no such restriction would be necessary—if women were not capable of engaging in a particular pursuit, they would not do it. Anyone would be free to try anything, but if they weren't good at it, they would be excluded by the competitive process through which roles are assigned.

This quotation highlights both the great strengths and failings of Mill's argument. His point that restricting women from certain roles doesn't make logical sense is important and has been proven correct in the time since he wrote this essay in the mid-19th century. Particularly from a contemporary perspective, it's clear that the motivation behind barring women from accessing certain activities and roles was pointlessly discriminatory and kept many extremely talented women from contributing to society.

At the same time, Mill's point that women should not receive any extra "favour" in a liberal society could be seen as misguided. As "positive discrimination" policies such as affirmative action demonstrate, members of oppressed groups can still experience the lingering impact of histories of oppression even when legal barriers fall away. Thus, such groups don't need to receive some favor for a system to be truly just.

☛ What women by nature cannot do, it is quite superfluous to forbid them from doing. What they can do, but not so well as the men who are their competitors, competition suffices to exclude them from; since nobody asks for protective duties and bounties in favour of women; it is only asked that the present bounties and protective duties in favour of men should be recalled. If women have a greater natural inclination for some things than for others, there is no need of laws or social inculcation to make the majority of them do the former in preference to the latter.

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 161

### Explanation and Analysis


Mill has described the ways in which—both in marriage and the public sphere—women are incentivized to give a false impression of their opinions in order to avoid risking upsetting men. He has then argued that only when women have the same rights and freedoms as men will it be possible to know what they think, believe, and desire. In this passage,

## Chapter 2 Quotes

☛ Meanwhile the wife is the actual bondservant of her husband: no less so, as far as legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so called [...] She can do no act whatever but by his permission, at least tacit. She can acquire no property but for him; the instant it becomes hers, even if by inheritance, it becomes ipso facto his. In this respect the wife's position under the common law of England is worse than that of slaves in the laws of many countries: by the Roman law, for example, a slave might have his peculium, which to a certain extent the law guaranteed to him for his exclusive use.

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 165

### Explanation and Analysis



At the beginning of Chapter 2, Mill turns his attention to


marriage, explaining how in earlier periods of European history, a woman did not even have to give true consent to being married, at which point her husband gained total power over her. While some people claim that women have a more equal role in marriage at the time Mill is writing, in this quotation he disproves this idea. He claims that women are just as oppressed as slaves, and he even goes so far as to claim that—when it comes to property rights—women are even worse off than the enslaved.

This is one of several moments in the book wherein Mill invokes slavery in order to forcefully make his point that women have shockingly few legal rights. He points out that, once married, women are under their husband's control, a dynamic that can indeed seem to resemble a kind of enslavement. At the same time, the analogy is not entirely accurate: first of all, it ignores the fact that half of enslaved people are themselves women, leaving it unclear where these women fit into the equation. Secondly, while it is true that enslaved people had certain property rights under Roman law, in the much more recent example of transatlantic slavery, enslaved people not only had no property rights but were themselves considered property. In this light, it is hard to argue that non-enslaved women are better off than slaves simply because their property is automatically owned by their husbands.

“I am far from pretending that wives are in general no better treated than slaves; but no slave is a slave to the same lengths, and in so full a sense of the word, as a wife is. Hardly any slave, except one immediately attached to the master's person, is a slave at all hours and all minutes; in general he has, like a soldier, his fixed task, and when it is done, or when he is off duty, he disposes, within certain limits, of his own time, and has a family life into which the master rarely intrudes.”

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 166

### Explanation and Analysis

Examining the conditions that women face within marriage, Mill has argued that from a legal perspective, women have about the same rights as enslaved people and in some ways are even worse off. In this passage, he makes a statement

that might at first appear to contradict both itself and his earlier argument. However, while Mill was earlier discussing legal rights, here he focuses on social conditions—two distinct but related issues. His argument is that while women may overall be treated a little better than slaves, their social condition is worse because it is so inescapable. While (according to Mill) the social condition of enslavement ends when an enslaved person is “off duty,” a wife is never off duty.

While Mill's argument successfully highlights the intimate, pervasive, and never-ending nature of gender discrimination, his analogy to slavery again contains flawed logic. First of all, it doesn't make much sense to argue that “no slave is a slave to the same lengths, and in so full a sense of the word, as a wife is.” The idea that womanhood is the truest form of slavery highlights a misunderstanding of what slavery is (and again, erases the existence of enslaved women). Furthermore, his argument that the social reality of being a slave ends when a slave is “off duty” is also incorrect, as it vastly underestimates the dehumanizing, inescapable trauma of being enslaved—a trauma that certainly did not disappear at the end of the work day.

“Not a word can be said for despotism in the family which cannot be said for political despotism.”

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 168

### Explanation and Analysis



Mill has pointed out that although women have very little in the way of legal rights, most women tend to be treated somewhat fairly. Defenders of the current system use this reality to argue that the law does not need to be changed. However, just because laws are not exercised to the fullest extent that they could be doesn't mean that they shouldn't be changed. In this short quotation, Mill implies that the reader should be no less horrified by “despotism in the family” than they should be of “political despotism.” He assumes that the reader is opposed to political despotism and hopes that they will see why power imbalances within gender relations is also dangerous.


The implication of this quotation is that although the

majority of husbands might be reasonably kind and fair, the fact that they have the legal right to be cruel or controlling is a matter of serious concern. When political leaders have too much power, it might encourage them to behave in a crueler and less fair manner; according to Mill's logic, the same would be true of husbands. Furthermore, this quotation arguably links the political world and the family in a way that implies that some of the problems that exist in the political world actually have their root in the family—specifically the unequal dynamic between men and women.

It is not true that in all voluntary association between two people, one of them must be absolute master: still less that the law must determine which of them it shall be.

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 174



### Explanation and Analysis


Mill has described the ways in which the family can be a breeding ground for tyrannical behavior and emphasized that people should be no less concerned about familial tyranny than political tyranny. He imagines that some people will object that there needs to be a “leader” within a family in order to make decisions, just as there needs to be a government. Yet in this quotation, he refutes this claim by arguing that a married couple is a “voluntary association between two people,” and that such a dynamic does not necessarily require one person to have absolute power.

By using the term “voluntary association,” Mill draws attention to the classical liberal principles of individual freedom and consent on which he bases the book's argument. He believes that it is wrong for men to have absolute power over their wives because this infringes on women's dignity and freedom as individuals. Furthermore, it infringes on the dignity and freedom of both members of a couple when the law dictates that men should be the leaders within married couples. If a couple decides that one person should have more decision-making power, it should be up to them to figure out who. Otherwise, the law has too much power in determining what people's lives should be like, which ultimately inhibits human flourishing and harms the greater good.

The family is a school of despotism, in which the virtues of despotism, but also its vices, are largely nourished [...] The family, justly constituted, would be the real school of the virtues of freedom.

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 180


### Explanation and Analysis

Mill has argued that for a long time, society was so deeply hierarchical that morality was purely a matter of submitting to power; there was no appreciation of the notion that human beings are equals. He recognizes that the world is gradually transforming into a more just and equal place, but in this passage, he notes that the family still encourages hierarchical and tyrannical tendencies that harm society. At the same time, Mill concedes that “despotism” is not without virtues. While he doesn't elaborate on what these are here, he has previously noted that there are some ways in which giving one person absolute authority can make decision-making more efficient.

Overall, however, Mill believes that the vices of despotism far outweigh its virtues. In the second part of the quotation, he argues that if the family was reorganized according to more just principles, not only would it no longer encourage despotism, but it would teach people “the virtues of freedom.” This observation foreshadows later feminist theory, which draws parallels between the power imbalances within the home and the way people behave in the public sphere. Indeed, this quotation could be seen as a predecessor to the 20th-century feminist idea that “the personal is political.” Far from seeing the personal (intimacy, love, marriage, and the family) as private and therefore inconsequential, Mill maintains that the way power works in people's intimate lives has a profound effect on shaping the public sphere.

The less fit a man is for the possession of power—the less likely to be allowed to exercise it over any person with that person's voluntary consent—the more does he hug himself in the consciousness of the power the law gives him, exact its legal rights to the utmost point which custom (the custom of men like himself) will tolerate, and take pleasure in using the power, merely to enliven the agreeable sense of possessing it.

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 181-182

### Explanation and Analysis

Mill has argued that even under the current law, there are already many married couples who live in a state of equality, with husbands refusing to exercise the excessive power they are legally granted over their wives. However, he argues that this doesn't mean the law shouldn't be changed, because—as he points out in this quotation—the current setup means that those who are least qualified to have power are most likely to abuse it. Men who are naturally selfish, cruel, and megalomaniacal are the ones who will enjoy abusing their power, whereas those who are kinder and fairer will restrain themselves.



Mill is a strong advocate of the idea that anyone who holds a position of authority should prove themselves to be most capable for that post. He argues that this would create a more just and happy society. As a result, the situation he describes in this quotation—where “the less fit a man is for the possession of power” the more power he wields—poses a major threat to the greater good.

restriction of women from the public sphere.

As Mill has mentioned elsewhere, people usually claim that women should not fully participate in public life because their “natural vocation” is that of a wife and mother. According to this logic, it would be against human nature for women to have professions or occupy political posts. However, Mill argues that the *real* reason why women face discrimination has nothing to do with their inherent natures and everything to do with men's feelings of discomfort at the idea of female equality. It is men's selfishness, self-consciousness, and desire for power that encourages them to place restrictions on women.

●● In the present day, power holds a smoother language, and whomsoever it oppresses, always pretends to do so for their own good: accordingly, when anything is forbidden to women, it is thought necessary to say, and desirable to believe, that they are incapable of doing it, and that they depart from their real path of success and happiness when they aspire to it.

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 187

### Explanation and Analysis



Mill has argued that the real reason why women continue to face discrimination in the public sphere is that men cannot bear the idea of living with an equal. He adds that at the time he is writing, people no longer believe that women have such inferior capabilities that they are truly unfit to perform professional roles, vote, or hold political office. In this quotation, he further illustrates this argument by pointing out that it has become common for those enacting oppression to claim that it is for the benefit of those they are oppressing. As a result, some men espouse the notion that participating in public life would make women unhappy, when in fact the true reason is that men themselves do not want women to participate.

Mill's insight here is all the more striking for how it resonates with the contemporary world. Even today, discriminatory practices are still regularly disguised as being in the interests of those they harm. Yet as Mill argues at several points in *The Subjection of Women*, such claims not only belie the true intentions of those who make them, they also don't make logical sense. If a person were truly incapable of engaging in a particular task or made unhappy

## Chapter 3 Quotes

●● I believe that their disabilities elsewhere are only clung to in order to maintain their subordination in domestic life; because the generality of the male sex cannot yet tolerate the idea of living with an equal.

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 186

### Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter 2, Mill examined how women are oppressed by marriage and the family. He argued that at the moment, families are tyrannical systems—but if they were reorganized according to principles of freedom and equality, they would be sites of justice. At the beginning of Chapter 3, Mill introduces the idea that discrimination against women in the public sphere persists because men can't bear the idea of “living with an equal.” This is one of the moments at which Mill is his most polemical, as his argument here contradicts how most people would justify the continued

by doing it, it wouldn't make sense to legally prohibit them from doing so. They would either choose not to do it themselves (if it made them unhappy) or be eliminated by the competitive process via which people are selected to occupy professional and political roles.

Moreover, when people are brought up, like many women of the higher classes (though less so in our own country than in any other) as kind of hot-house plants, shielded from the wholesome vicissitudes of air and temperature, and untrained in any of the occupations and exercises which give stimulus and development to the circulatory and muscular system [...] it is no wonder if those of them who do not die of consumption, grow up with constitutions liable to derangement from slight causes, both internal and external, and without stamina to support any task, physical or mental, requiring continuity of effort. But women brought up to work for their livelihood show none of these morbid characteristics, unless indeed they are chained to an excess of sedentary work in confined and unhealthy rooms.

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 198

### Explanation and Analysis

Mill has considered a number of stereotypes about women's intelligence and capabilities, concluding that it is unlikely that women have any natural inferiority to men. Furthermore, the differences in the way women tend to think (whether they are caused by social conditions or not) could actually enable them to make especially valuable contributions to knowledge. In this passage, he considers the claim that women's "nervous" dispositions makes them unsuitable as full participants in public life, explaining that women's fragility is not a biological trait and is furthermore only confined to upper-class women.

Mill's claim that upper-class women become fragile and nervous because they are raised like "hot-house plants" makes the case that it is social conditions, rather than biology, that create this characteristic. He further proves this point by comparing upper-class women to working-class women, who spend more time outside engaged in vigorous labor and who do not have nervous dispositions at all. Overall, this quotation highlights the circular nature about gendered characteristics and how this has held women back. People think that women are kept inside

because they are fragile, but in fact it is being kept inside that *makes* women fragile. In this sense, Mill also highlights the sinister ways in which people subtly keep women in a state of weakness and fragility.

I have said that it cannot now be known how much of the existing mental differences between men and women is natural, and how much artificial; whether there are any natural differences at all; or, supposing all artificial causes of difference to be withdrawn, what natural character would be revealed [...] We cannot isolate a human being from the circumstances of his condition, so as to ascertain experimentally what he would have been by nature; but we can consider what he is, and what his circumstances have been, and whether the one would have been capable of producing the other.

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 206



### Explanation and Analysis

Mill has been discussing whether gendered characteristics can be determined to be biological or social in origin. In England, part of what makes this difficult is that the English tend not to act according to nature but instead according to custom. In this passage, Mill reiterates a point he has made throughout the book, which is that it is impossible to know for sure whether traits are biological or social in origin. However, as Mill describes here, this does not mean that *nothing* can be known about human characteristics and their origins. It is still possible to gain significant knowledge by observing a person's behavior and considering it alongside their social conditions.

This is one of the most forward-thinking passages in the book, as it directly foreshadows the ideas that dominate the debate over biology versus social conditions today. In the contemporary world, most people acknowledge that gender is produced by a combination of biological and social conditions and that—because no one can escape being affected by social conditions—it becomes difficult to acquire any absolute knowledge about the distinction. However, by observing both a person's characteristics and the social influences on them, it is possible to at least gain a better understanding of how gendered characteristics work.

☞ If women lived in a different country from men, and had never read any of their writings, they would have had a literature of their own.

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 210


### Explanation and Analysis

Mill has considered whether women are capable of producing works of philosophy, art, and science that contain extraordinary insight and vision. He has argued that only women must have access to proper education and resources before it's possible to tell what levels of genius they are capable of achieving. He also notes that since women have to rely on men to publish their work, the work often ends up getting attributed wholly to these men rather than the actual female authors. In this quotation, Mill concludes that if women lived in a society free of men, they would develop their own contributions to philosophy, art, and science, free from the restrictions that men and the system of gender inequality place on them.

This quotation conveys a key idea within Mill's argument for women's rights: it is not women themselves, but men and the restrictions they place on women, that have stopped women from properly contributing to society. From a contemporary perspective, this might seem obvious—but as Mill notes, it is common at the time he is writing (the mid-19th century) for people to imply that women's lack of achievements is due to their own failings. Indeed, throughout the book, Mill persuasively shows that when men claim that women are mentally inferior, it is usually a sign of men's own willful lack of knowledge.

☞ A woman who joins in any movement which her husband disapproves, makes herself a martyr, with out even being able to be an apostle, for the husband can legally put a stop to her apostleship. Women cannot be expected to devote themselves to the emancipation of women, until men in considerable number are prepared to join with them in the undertaking.

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 218

### Explanation and Analysis

Having summarized the ways in which women are (falsely) considered to be less intelligent than men, Mill examines the stereotype that women are morally superior to men. This could be interpreted as evidence that people understand that having unjust power over women has a morally corrupting effect. In this quotation at the end of Chapter 3, Mill considers the immense challenges that face women who seek to join the struggle for their rights. If an individual woman was to join without the support of her husband, she would become a “martyr.” This means that until a significant number of men join the struggle themselves, women can't be expected to fight for their rights.

This is an important point, as it conveys Mill's motivation for writing the book. *The Subjection of Women* is notable for being the first modern text about women's emancipation written by a man. It is clear that Mill decided to write it in part to speak as a man to other men, persuading others like him to realize that they should be invested in women's rights. In this quotation, he emphasizes that the reason why men must take a significant role is because the risks are too great if women are left to do that alone. Furthermore, as he has shown throughout the book, many of the problems women face have little to do with women themselves and all to do with the men who impose problems on them.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

☞ There remain no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house.

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 220

### Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of Chapter 1V, Mill raises the question of whether women's emancipation will have a positive effect on society as a whole. He begins by noting that there is no doubt that enhancing women's rights will ease the suffering of many individual women trapped in abusive marriages. As an institution that so easily permits the abuse of power with no consequences, marriage (in its current form) is an outdated and unfortunate relic of the past. As Mill argues in this quotation, it is the only form of legal slavery that remains. This reiteration of one of Mill's most fiercely argued points conveys the horrifying depths of injustice




that he believes marriage involves.

At the same time, there are multiple ways in which this is not quite a historically accurate statement. At the time Mill is writing (the mid-19th century), slavery was still legal in several countries, such as Brazil and Cuba. While it can be assumed his focus is on Britain, the fact that slavery was not entirely eradicated invalidates his claim that the oppression of women is the only legal form of slavery that still exists. Furthermore, his own phrasing in this quotation draws attention to a logical problem in his argument about using slavery as a metaphor for womanhood. Enslaved people—including, of course, enslaved women—were under the control of the “mistress of [the] house” as well as the master. While non-enslaved women undoubtedly face their own burden of oppression, it is worth noting that they were also “masters” of the enslaved.

☛ All the selfish propensities, the self-worship, the unjust self-preference, which exist among mankind, have their source and root in, and derive their principal nourishment from, the present constitution of the relation between men and women.

**Related Characters:** John Stuart Mill (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 220

### Explanation and Analysis

Mill has again emphasized the ways in which women’s oppression is a blight on society that should be eradicated. Yet he acknowledges that some readers will want to hear about how women’s emancipation would also improve society as a whole. In this quotation, he makes the extraordinary claim that *all* the selfishness that exists among humanity stems from the oppression of women. The implication is that if men and women had a more equal relationship to one another, many negative traits of human behavior would start to fall away.

Skeptical readers might accuse this statement of being an exaggeration. After all, there are many other motives that drive human selfishness, including racism or greed. Yet this quotation could also be read as less a literal expression of fact and more a rhetorical flourish that emphasizes how deeply intertwined the question of women’s rights is with more abstract problems in human society. Some might believe that gender inequality is a niche issue, but in reality it reflects such stark and serious issues that afflict all of human society that it is fair to treat gender relations as representative of all that is wrong with unjust power imbalances.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1

In *The Subjection of Women*, John Stuart Mill will argue that the current state of gender inequality is inherently wrong and that it is holding back human civilization. Men and women should instead exist in a state of “perfect equality,” with neither gender having any power or privilege over the other. This is a difficult argument to make, because people tend to have a very strong emotional response to the issue of gender, which prohibits critical, rational engagement. Furthermore, it is especially challenging to make an argument that contradicts an opinion held by most people in society.

At the time Mill is writing, it is assumed that most people are in favor of liberty for all people, including equal treatment under the law. In reality, however, the Mill still faces an uphill battle arguing that men and women should be equal. Even if his argument were perfectly sound, it would not be enough to convince most people, because gender inequality is such a deeply entrenched aspect of society. Mill understands how challenging it is to question the ideas which with one has been raised. He doesn't think the problem is that people are not persuaded enough by argument, but that they are too easily persuaded by emotion.

Mill laments the fact that in the 19th century, “instinct” is too often favored over reason. Mill is happy to accept people's judgment that his position is wrong, but not if this judgment is clouded by bias. It would be one thing if the current system of gender inequality had been arrived at via a rational process of argument and experimentation, proving it to be the system that best ensured both men and women's well-being. However, this is the opposite of what actually happened. Not only has no other system been tested; the current system has never even been properly discussed.

*Mill lays his argument out immediately, refusing to shy away from the bold nature of his claims. Although from a contemporary perspective it might seem entirely obvious that men and women should exist in a state of “perfect equality,” at the time this essay was written (the mid-19th century), this would have seemed an unrealistic and scandalous notion. Even those sympathetic to the plight of women would likely favor gradual reform over instituting total equality under the law.*



*This passage is crucial, as it shows that Mill will leverage the current favorable view of individual freedom in order to argue in favor of gender inequality. He seeks to show that those who claim to be in favor of personal liberty yet still support the existing system of gender relations are hypocritical. Yet because so few people question the current system, he faces a difficult task.*



*As a political philosopher, Mill wants to present a solid case for gender equality based on a strong argument. Rather than relying on historical context, emotional appeals, or even the testimony of women themselves, Mill's focus is on logic. He is therefore happy to have readers disagree with him as long as they do so on his terms, which would mean identifying logical flaws in his argument.*



Throughout history, women have been subordinate to men due to their comparative physical weakness. This imbalance has been reinforced by laws that give women few legal rights. Mill compares this phenomenon to **slavery**, which began with enslaved people being physically overpowered by masters. Then, it was turned into an elaborate legal framework that protected and enhanced the power of enslavers. For many centuries, both slavery and gender inequality were not questioned by any philosopher. Now, the enslavement of men has been largely abolished, but women's subordination—which Mill characterizes as female slavery—persists, albeit in a milder form.

The fact that gender inequality has persisted for so long does not mean it is a good thing. It is important to remember that the reason gender inequality exists in the first place is due to the “law of the strongest,” a principle that has been rejected in the modern world. Gender is perhaps the only domain in which the “law of the strongest” persists. In the modern world, people are starkly disconnected from what the primitive version of human society was like. In this primitive state, life was harsh and heavily biased toward those with the most physical power.

In ancient times, the Stoics (along with the Jews) were the first to introduce the idea that enslavers had an ethical duty toward the **enslaved**. Christianity upheld this view in theory, but for many centuries, it was not properly implemented in Christian societies. While people expressed their faith in intense ways—from going to war to fasting—Christian devotion did not decrease the existence of violence and tyranny. It is only recently, with the emergence of a large bourgeois class and a more powerful urban working class, that society has shifted away from tyranny and toward freedom.

Only 40 years prior to the time of Mill's writing, English people were still allowed to own **enslaved** people, kidnapping them from their homelands and “work[ing] them literally to death.” Yet even while slavery was legal, many English people were critical of it, because it was such an extreme example of the law of force and because the only justifications for it were profit and greed. At the same time, other institutions—such as the monarchy—currently remain in place in England despite the fact that they have no real justification. Once a system like the monarchy is established, it is hard to dismantle it. Similarly, gender inequality has notable lasting power.

*Here, Mill emphasizes that there is no logical justification for the system of men having power over women. This dynamic only emerged due to men's greater physical strength, which Mill does not consider to be a valid justification or a reasonable way to organize society. While ancient societies were necessarily organized by fitness for survival, Mill holds that this shouldn't be the case in a modern community. Mill introduces slavery as an ongoing symbol of women's oppression to appeal to his readers' emotions, given that slavery as an institution was widely viewed as immoral by this time (the mid-19th century).*



*Mill is explicitly rejecting a conservative model of organizing society, which would state that systems that have existed for a long time have inherent value. Mill thinks this is not true at all—in fact, there might be a reverse correlation between how old a system is and how good it is for humanity. This is due to the fact that the early humans lived in a much harsher and crueler world prior to the development of civilizations.*



*As an agnostic, Mill has an ambivalent view of how positive the impact of Christianity has been on society. Although he acknowledges that Christian teachings encourage fair and just treatment toward others, he also notes that in practice, Christianity did not always end up encouraging these values.*



*Mill's observations about slavery in this passage speak to the dangerous extent to which cruel, unjust institutions can be allowed to survive due to people's moral inertia and complicity. As he points out, slave-owners would work slaves “literally to death,” highlighting the brutality of this system. The fact that many in England were critical of slavery yet still essentially permitted it to exist demonstrates the power of social institutions to endure even if most people do not actively support them. The same logic, Mill implies, can be applied to the subjugation of women.*



One reason for why gender inequality has survived so long is because it gives an opportunity for all men—regardless of their class—to have power over women. Moreover, men are particularly well set up to squash resistance from women, because of the intimacy between the sexes. Men constantly bribe or intimidate women to obey. For this reason, even as other systems of unjust power and authority have been dismantled, gender inequality remains. Some people might object that whereas slavery and the monarchy are “arbitrary” social inventions, the unequal relation between the sexes is “natural.” In reality, however, gender inequality only *seems* natural—just as **slavery** did before abolition.

Just as in Ancient Greek times certain ethnic groups were suggested to have “slave natures,” so too were Black people considered natural slaves but white people in the American South. Similarly, those who support the monarchy also call it “natural,” and the law of force itself is often characterized as humanity’s natural state. In the Middle Ages, the idea that a serf was equal to a nobleman would have seemed extremely unnatural and untrue. Even when serfs fought for better rights, they did not make the case that they were equal to those ranked above them. Because gender inequality is universal, it seems natural.

However, history shows that current ideas about gender were not always in place. In feudal times, upper-class women were encouraged to have “masculine” traits such as physical strength. In Ancient Greece, there were examples of relatively free and independent women such as the Spartans and Amazons (who were mythological but understood to be real by people at the time).

Some people will object that there is another important difference between gender inequality and other forms of domination, because women freely consent to their status. Firstly, this is not actually true; ever since women have been allowed to publish writing, they have expressed dissatisfaction with their oppression. Recently, thousands of English women wrote a petition to Parliament in favor of female suffrage. In the U.S., France, Italy, Switzerland, and Russia, women are also fighting for their rights. Furthermore, it is important to remember that oppressed people always make gradual demands for their rights, rather than insisting on immediate full equality. They begin by criticizing excessive or unnecessary acts of oppression before they demand an end to the unequal relationship itself.

*One of the most significant contributions made by The Subjection of Women is its exposure of male views on gender inequality. Given that this is the first book about women’s rights written by a man in the modern West, it contains insights into how and why men uphold sexism that previously might have gone unmentioned. As a man himself, Mill is well-positioned to be able to reveal the logic that encourages men to engage in women’s oppression.*



*One of the most important arguments Mill makes in this essay is that people should be critical of the claims people make about nature. Often, when people say something is natural, they mean that it is a familiar, widespread, or ancient custom—not that it is actually based in biology.*



*Here, Mill questions the extent to which gender inequality is a universal condition that has existed across time and place. Although he doesn’t mention them here, there are actually many more examples of cultures across global history that did not have a patriarchal system in place at all.*



*This passage lays out some important information about the cultural and political context in which Mill is writing. Although restrictive laws and regressive ideas about gender remain firmly in place, there is increasing momentum around the issue of women’s rights. Mill is, thus, not a lone voice in his advocacy of gender equality—rather, he’s joining a chorus of people agitating for women’s emancipation across the world.*



There are many reasons why women are unlikely to resist male oppression. First of all, most men do not want to feel that they are oppressing women, but rather want women to *willingly* submit to them. For this reason, they indoctrinate women into accepting their own oppression. Women are raised to believe that, unlike men, they are naturally submissive. They come to think that it is their duty to live in service of other people. Overall, this has the effect of making women believe that the sole purpose of their lives is to be “attractive to men.”

If the same were true of another oppressed group—for example, if peasants were indoctrinated into obsessing over the approval of noblemen—then it is likely people would also think that the subjugation of this group was “natural.” It is therefore safe to say that just because gender inequality is the norm doesn’t mean it’s a good thing. In fact, Mill will now go on to prove that gender inequality is a harmful, out-of-date system that should be abandoned. Modern society is defined by the fact that the position a person was born into no longer determines what they can do in life. This was very different in the past, when a person’s class and race defined how they lived and what they were able to achieve.

In modern Europe, restrictive laws and customs have been relaxed in order to allow individuals greater freedom in what they want to pursue. While of course people have different levels of ability and not everyone is capable of performing every role, people now generally believe that “freedom of individual choice” is the system that works best for society as a whole. When people realize that they are not capable of engaging in a particular pursuit, they usually give up on it of their own accord and thus don’t need restrictive laws to prevent them from doing it.

Given this trend toward individual freedom, there is no reason to believe that any person would be naturally more or less suited to a particular pursuit due to their race, class, or gender. Even if a restrictive system only rarely keeps out highly talented people, this is still a terrible loss. Currently, almost all roles in the world (except royalty) can be gained by any man via a competitive, meritocratic process. Some roles require that a person be wealthy, but anyone can strive to become wealthy. Men are not legally banned from attempting to compete for a role; the laws that ban women from competing on account of their gender are therefore a unique form of discrimination.

*Here, Mill insightfully describes the sinister psychological dynamics involved in gender-based oppression. It is not enough that men oppress women—they also compel women to act as if they enjoy and relish their oppression. Of course, this makes ending women’s subjugation more difficult, because many women are indoctrinated into liking the current system.*



*From a contemporary perspective, it might be strange to read Mill assert that at the time he was writing, a person’s class or race did not determine what they could achieve in life. Compared to the present, 19th-century England still retained a rigid class system. At the same time, the world in which Mill is living has changed drastically from what existed before, when the possibility of upward social mobility was essentially nonexistent.*



*In many ways, the system that Mill describes here could be seen as less a realistic depiction of 18th-century Europe and more an aspirational one. Class and race-based restrictions still very much impacted what people were able to achieve in life, so it wasn’t always the case that every person had full “freedom of individual choice.” But it was also true that society was moving toward a more egalitarian, merit-based system at this time.*



*Again, it is not entirely true from a historical perspective that at the time Mill is writing, all roles are obtained via meritocratic competitions. There were still many jobs that were handed down through generations of families, and educational opportunities were almost always allocated according to one’s class status. However, there is also a clear sense of hope within Mill’s writing that society is changing into a fairer, more merit-based system.*



Gender discrimination is, then, the sole survivor of an antiquated system, which means that it should be intensely scrutinized to test if its merits still stand. There needs to be a fair, honest, and comprehensive discussion of gender inequality that doesn't rely upon flimsy assertions—such as the claim that the majority of people support the current system. Some might argue that gender equality could only be proven to work in theory. But the same argument could actually be used against the current system, since nothing else has been tried. Without anything to compare the current system with, it is impossible to determine that it is the better way of doing this.

Similarly, it does not make sense to argue that the inherent nature of men and women leads them to embrace the current system. Without trying another system, it is impossible to know what the inherent nature of men and women even is. What people call women's nature is actually artificial, because it is produced by the social conditions of the current world. Indeed, the general lack of knowledge about how people come to be the way they are is currently the biggest factor holding back the advancement of thought. False stereotypes abound about people of particular nationalities, and the same is true of men and women—including the idea that men care more about the greater good than women do.

In order to determine what the natural differences between men and women are, it is first necessary to prove with absolute certainty that these differences do not have a social origin. Currently, there is very little real knowledge on this matter, in part because women themselves are so rarely able to contribute to research. Men tend to think they know a lot about women simply because they have had intimate relationships with them. In fact, the opposite is true: men know very little about women, because wives deliberately hide their true natures from their husbands. Even in rare cases when a man is generally open and interested in knowing his wife's nature, their unequal relationship will inevitably make it difficult for him to properly understand her.

The problem is not that women aim to be deceptive but that—due to their position of relative powerlessness—they have so much to lose if their husbands see something they dislike. This prevents men from really knowing women. Moreover, even if a man was to understand his wife perfectly, he still wouldn't have any knowledge about women of other cultures and classes. Similar problems play out in publishing. It is only recently that women have started being able to publish their own writing, and when they do, they must be careful not to write anything of which men would disapprove. While this is starting to change, people will only have access to women's real thoughts when there is no gender discrimination in the world of publishing.

*Mill has little patience for vague logic or conservative sentiments that support gender inequality simply because most people supposedly like it or because it has existed for a long time. Although these are the reasons why most people tolerate (or even embrace) women's oppression, Mill maintains that they are not legitimate justifications.*



*Here, Mill again asks the reader to critically examine ideas that they accept simply because they are widespread and familiar. Accepting "common knowledge" as truth is, for Mill, a way of maintaining the status quo even if it doesn't actually work well. Only through rigorous and imaginative critical thinking will people be able to develop better ideas about how society should function.*



*The Subjection of Women was written with input from Mill's stepdaughter Helen Taylor and his wife and lifelong collaborator, Harriet Taylor Mill. Although it is hard to know for sure how and in what way these women's contributions were incorporated, one can imagine that this is a passage that benefited from women's input. After all, given that Mill is a man himself, it is more difficult for him to authoritatively state that the version of themselves women present to men is an illusion.*



*In a way, the fact that men think they have insight into women's thoughts (but actually don't) is even worse than if men had no insight at all. Falsely believing that they understand women allows men to claim that they know what women want and to uphold the notion that women supposedly enjoy the current system of gender inequality. This is why it is so important for Mill to dispute the idea that men truly understand women.*



Although Mill has devoted much time to describing the incredible difficulty of men really being able to know women, the good news is that according to the principles on which modern society is founded, it should be women themselves who determine what their role should be. Indeed, it is only via introducing this system that women's real thoughts will become clear. It doesn't make sense to restrict women from pursuits based on the idea that they are incapable of engaging in them. If they truly were incapable, then in a liberal, competitive society, they would be disqualified anyway.

Men often claim that a woman's natural role is to be a wife and mother. Yet this doesn't make much logical sense either, because if it were true, there wouldn't need to be any laws and customs incentivizing them to do it. Indeed, the truth is likely closer to the fact that society needs women to produce children, and this is why women are more or less forced to do so. (The same logic was used when it came to justifying systems like **slavery** or the forced conscription of sailors.) In the case of gender, it arguably reveals that men secretly know that marriage is not very appealing for women. If women all had freedom of choice, Mill suspects that few would choose to only be wives and mothers.

## CHAPTER 2

At the time Mill is writing, marriage is the central purpose of life for almost all women (except those who are considered too unattractive to marry). Until quite late in European history, women had no say whatsoever when it came to the question of who they married; while at the wedding they technically had to consent to the union, no one cared if this consent was forced. Once married, husbands held absolute power over their wives, who in turn had no rights of their own. People claim that in women are in a better position in contemporary society, but the reality is that women remain effectively **enslaved** to their husbands. Mill argues that in some ways, women are even worse off than slaves, because they cannot own their own property.

In certain cases, the upper classes work out exceptions that allow women to inherit and own property, but these are difficult to uphold. Even noblemen can do little to ensure that inheritance is passed to his daughter rather than his son-in-law. Furthermore, while in general women are treated somewhat better than **slaves**, in a way their social predicament is worse because it has no beginning and end. Unlike a workday, a woman's role as a wife is continuous. Furthermore, under the current system, women do not have real authority over their own children. Even if a woman's husband dies, she cannot legally be considered her children's guardian.

*Mill's emphasis on autonomy and self-determination means he believes that even if men did perfectly understand women, how women live and what they are allowed to do shouldn't be men's decision anyway.*



*Here, Mill foreshadows much later feminist work (mostly written in the second half of the 20th century), which examines how women are coerced into devoting themselves to marriage and motherhood. Second-wave feminists agreed that household labor—including the labor of caring for a husband and raising kids—is often difficult and unappealing, and that this is the reason why there is such social pressure to convince women that raising a family is their natural duty.*



*This passage contains a stark reminder that marriage was not always the romantic union between loving equals that it is now upheld as being. In the past, it was a strict contract that involved a woman signing away total control of her life over to a man who was often not someone she had even chosen.*



*Here, Mill provides details about how the law upholds gender inequality, emphasizing that women not only have little control over their lives but are essentially legally barred from having autonomy. He particularly underlines the fact that they are not allowed to own property, which affects not just the financial side of life but also love and intimacy (through the issue of guardianship of children).*



Similarly, women have little legal power to leave their husbands and can be forced to return if they attempt to flee. Until recently, legal divorce was so expensive that only the wealthy elite could afford it. Yet Mill argues that because husbands have so much power over their wives, it is reasonable to assert that a woman should be allowed to separate from her husband if he treats her badly. He notes that under certain **slavery** laws, enslaved people could force their masters to sell them, but a similar possibility does not exist for married women.

Mill insists that his argument here is not an exaggeration but rather an accurate account of women's legal status. In reality, many women are treated better than simply looking at the law would imply. Defenders of the current system use this fact to defend it, but this misses the point. The existence of tyranny within the **family** is a major social problem just like political tyranny. Furthermore, it is an ironic and unfortunate reality that oppressed people (including the **enslaved**) often exhibit strong loyalty to those who mistreat them.

The expectation is that institutions like **slavery** and marriage should be judged according to the best examples of how they can be, but this is faulty logic. There is no doubt that some husbands are truly good and kind, but it is worth remembering that when a man gets married, there is no process in place to check that he will treat his wife fairly. Moreover, the brutality that many men do inflict on their wives is basically ignored by the law, which does not protect women against their husbands (despite recent meager attempts to rectify this). While there are arguably few truly evil husbands, moderate forms of mistreatment are very common.

The fact that every adult man is given such absolute power over his wife without having to prove that he is worthy of this power is deeply concerning. While the **family** can—in its most ideal state—encourage its members to act with tenderness and love, it is more often a space of selfishness and excessive control. The problem is not limited to husbands, as there are various ways in which wives can actually commit abuses of power, all while being deprived of their own rights. Indeed, the fact that some women are able to exercise power over and via their husbands does not make up for the lack of power they hold when it comes to themselves.

*The details Mill presents about women's legal oppression are so stark that it is unnecessary for him to be making claims about women's status being worse than slavery (particularly given that they are not always historically accurate). Yet given the power of the abolitionist movement at the time he is writing, Mill continues to leverage references to slavery for his own argument about gender inequality.*



*Like with slavery, Mill presupposes that his readers will be opposed to political tyranny and see it as a dangerous force in the world. As a result, all he needs to do is argue that gender inequality causes (or is parallel to) political tyranny in order to persuade readers that it is a threat to societal well-being.*



*In many ways, Mill is more concerned with how society should be governed than how individuals should behave. In hoping to transform society into a more equitable place, his focus is on how laws could be adjusted in order to promote the common good while leaving people's individual behaviors within their own control. This is typical of Mill's classical liberal political philosophy, which is centered around civil liberties under the law.*



*Here, Mill returns to his emphasis on competitive, meritocratic processes as essential to ensuring that a society flourishes. He thinks that under certain circumstances, it is acceptable for people to wield power and authority over others—but they must prove themselves worthy of this power. (By “worthy,” Mill assumedly means competent and capable of moral reason.)*





Some people might object that, just as a society needs a government, each **family** needs a “ruler” to make decisions. Mill argues that this is not true, as in other systems of voluntary association—such as a business partnership—power is divided equally, with no one person having ultimate control. Of course, it is more efficient if certain decisions are made by one member of a duo without deliberation or compromise. But there is no reason why this decision-maker always has to be the same person. Instead, power can be evenly divided between the two people according to their strengths and weaknesses. However, there should never be a dynamic where one person submits to the absolute power of the other.

Some might argue that in the existing system, husbands tend to be more yielding than wives. Mill can imagine this being said a few generations ago when it was common to mock women, whereas in the present, people more often claim that women are superior to men. This might be true when it comes to selflessness within the **family**, but is not worth much dwelling on, because it is likely the result of women being raised to believe they should sacrifice themselves for the sake of others. If men and women had equal rights, there would be no need for such excessive self-sacrifice among women.

Mill imagines that there are surely some women out there who don't seek compromise but instead want to have sole and total control, just as there are men who feel this way. These people should remain alone, as it would be unjust for any person to have to live with them.

Up until this point, society has been so thoroughly shaped by the law of force that people have come to think of their equals as their enemies. In such a deeply hierarchical world, morality revolves around submitting to power. In the ancient world, there was an understanding that equality was essential to justice, but only free men were considered equal to one another; women, **slaves**, and other minoritized groups remained subjugated. Now, society is once again shifting toward a system of justice grounded on equality. However, the **family** remains a site of “despotism” where, if structured differently, it should teach the value of freedom.

*In invoking the comparison of a business relationship, Mill does not necessarily mean that marriages should operate like businesses. However, he does believe that the principles of freedom of association, autonomy, and consent are central to both business and social life. According to him, these principles enable human flourishing.*



*Mill calls out the disingenuousness behind claims about women being superior to men. He observes that what can seem like praise could actually be a dismissal, since upholding women as better than men subtly pressures them to uphold this moral superiority through self-sacrifice. If praise is not accompanied by respectful behavior, Mill implies, then it should not be taking at face value.*



*Unlike some theorists, Mill doesn't want to make people conform to his idea of how they should behave—instead, he appreciates the diversity of desires that exist among human beings. However, he also warns about the dangers of these desires.*



*Unlike people who harbor a sentimental view of the family, Mill is unconvinced by the notion that the family unit automatically encourages love, tenderness, and mutual support. Indeed, he believes that under a system of extreme gender inequality, it is quite unlikely that the family would foster these values. It is more likely that families fall into selfish, tyrannical, and cruel behaviors.*



Parents should teach by example, loving each other as equals in order to give their children a proper moral education. In reality, many married couples already live this way (Mill notes that he suspects that most of the upper classes do). The law should thus be changed so that it reflects how people should and do actually behave. Currently, men who are least equipped to responsibly handle power are most likely to abuse it, simply because such abuse is legally available to them. Mill observes that among “the most naturally brutal and morally uneducated part of the lower classes,” the subjugation of women within the law encourages men to feel a particularly strong hatred toward their own wives.

Some may object that religion encourages submission; indeed, there are several Christian teachings that instruct women to obey their husbands. However, these teachings reflect the world that existed at the time of the Bible rather than the true message of Christianity. When it comes to property, it should be obvious that marriage must not interfere with a woman’s right to own their own property. Mill imagines that some sentimental people might be shocked by the idea that married couples should keep their financial interests separate, yet he stands by this point. When laws grant women their own property rights (as is true in parts of the U.S. at the time Mill is writing), it will prevent men from marrying women in order to effectively steal from them.

When women earn money for their **families** in addition to raising children and managing the household, it is usually an unjust arrangement, allowing husbands to become lazy and waste time drinking. The ability to earn money is an essential part of a woman’s dignity, but this must be paired with changes in marriage law that give women equal rights, including the right to separate from their husbands if they wish. Women should be allowed to choose the extent to which they devote themselves entirely to raising children and managing the household for as much time as that takes. There shouldn’t be laws regulating this; instead, people should be able to choose according to their own wishes.

*At the time Mill is writing, it is common to assert that the upper classes are more moral than the working classes, hence his belief that the lower classes in particular contain “naturally brutal and morally uneducated” people. While such a sentiment might seem abhorrent from a contemporary perspective, at the time it was believed that existing within elite society and receiving a thorough education were essential to acting ethically. Working-class people were often characterized as being immature, vulnerable to temptation, and inclined to commit wrongdoing.*



*Mill’s observation about the Bible is strikingly modern. Again, because he is agnostic, he rejects the idea that the Bible contains fundamental truths and moral instructions that must be obeyed. Instead, he sees it as a text that was a product of the period in which it was written (where gender inequality, as well as other social ills, were deeply enshrined). For Mill, it is a bad idea to follow biblical teachings if they help perpetuate an outdated, unjust way of organizing society.*



*Here, Mill again foreshadows a contemporary feminist talking point: just as women should not be forced to confine themselves to the domestic sphere, neither should they be forced to work full-time. This is especially the case if working would mean supporting husbands that don’t contribute themselves. What is important is that the option of working outside the home exists, so that women can freely decide for themselves.*



## CHAPTER 3

Mill believes that women continue to face discrimination in the public sphere because the majority of men can't bear to see them as equals. Without this factor, it is likely that everyone would admit that restricting women from public life is pointless. Indeed, recently it has become far less common for people to argue that women are less intelligent than men. Yet this can be attributed to the fact in the contemporary world, when people act in an oppressive way, they tend to pretend it is in the interests of those they are oppressing. This is why men claim that women would be made unhappy by holding certain positions or performing certain tasks, when the truth is that men don't want women doing these things.

The reality is that when women are barred from participating in the public sphere, sometimes positions and roles are inevitably granted to men who are less competent than a woman might be. Of course, there will still be men who would be the best and most capable fit for a given role, but that will be decided by the process of competition. There is no need to exclude women from competing on the basis of their gender. It is neither effective nor just to have a smaller competitive pool in which women are not allowed to participate.

The question of who should be allowed to vote is in some ways separate from that of who should be allowed to hold political office. It wouldn't make sense that only those who were suitable to be Members of Parliament themselves were able to vote in elections, because holding political office and voting are too very different tasks. Indeed, everyone should have the right of self-protection from unfair rule given by voting. Moreover, women are likely to share the political views of men of their own class. Even if women retain the status of slaves, they should still be allowed to vote in order to protect themselves from unjust laws.

It is unnecessary to determine in advance whether women are capable of holding particular positions. If a woman were to get to the point of successfully holding a professional position, she would already have proved that she was capable of it. Even if only a small number of women had such capabilities, it would still be important to protect their access to exercising them. Psychological knowledge suggests that if women seem less intelligent or skilled than men, it is because of their comparative lack of education rather than anything to do with their inherent nature. Moreover, there are historical examples of women—such as Queen Elizabeth I and Joan of Arc—who have proven themselves to be exceptionally capable in political roles.

*Here, Mill once again examines disingenuous justifications for gender inequality and exposes their underlying meaning. He recognizes that it is no longer acceptable to claim that women are severely mentally inferior—but he notes that the result is that people simply end up misrepresenting their true beliefs and intentions when discussing women's role in public life.*



*As a utilitarian philosopher, Mill is deeply invested in creating a system in which every position in society goes to the person most capable of performing it. Not only would this aid efficiency and innovation, it would also enhance the individual rights and freedoms of every person. According to Mill's framework, this is a win-win situation.*



*Here, Mill seems to slightly shy away from the full extent of his argument, which would logically indicate that women should not just be allowed to vote but also hold political office. This may be because when so many people remain adamantly opposed to women's suffrage, arguing that women should also be MPs could seem too radical.*



*Here, Mill again conveys his profound (and perhaps naïve) faith in meritocratic competition as a way of fairly selecting the best candidate for a job. Socioeconomic disparities and issues like unconscious bias arguably make it difficult to make a selection process truly fair. Regardless, his allusions to Queen Elizabeth I and Joan of Arc are strong examples of women who are no less competent than men, refuting the notion that women are inherently less intelligent or skilled.*



Indeed, of the very few women who have ended up being queens, a disproportionately high amount have proven to be exceptionally talented rulers. Furthermore, they have tended to display characteristics that are usually seen as unfeminine, such as decisiveness and strength. Some respond to this with a joke about how—because monarchs are supposedly controlled by their partners—when a king is in power, it is really a woman in control (and vice versa). However, Mill notes that weak kings are usually just as much (if not more) influenced by male advisors than by their wives.

If women are capable of something as serious as political rule, surely it makes sense that they are also capable of lesser tasks. Royal women are the only class of women permitted to take an interest in topics like politics and have proved themselves highly competent. It can thus be inferred that the same would be true of all women, if they were given the chance to prove themselves. Overall, if women were completely free to pursue opportunities, activities, and roles according to their desire—without being influenced by restrictive societal norms—it is reasonable to believe that they would prove themselves equal to men.

Thus far, women's natures have been thoroughly distorted by the "unnatural [...] state" of gender inequality. The differences that currently seem to exist between men and women can thus almost all be shown to stem from social conditions. Mill wonders if women's special capacity for intuition is actually the product of having less education and less experience of public life. If one considers that intuition is in some ways oppositional to empirical research, then it makes sense that those who are less able to observe the world around them have a greater capacity for intuition. Women tend to make similar mistakes to an intelligent man who's self-educated, in that they have excellent insight but might lack basic knowledge due to missing out on institutional learning.

Women tend to be more interested in the real and present elements of life than in abstract theories. They thus have particular contributions to make when it comes to the work of putting theory into practice. They also tend to be very quick observers capable of making reasonable snap judgments. Some might say that women's nervous disposition disqualifies them from professional life. But Mill suspects that much of what makes women seem "nervous" is that they have excess energy they are not allowed to put to use. He also thinks this is due to upper-class women being raised like "hot-house plants," totally shielded from the outside world. Indeed, the fact that working-class women do not exhibit the same fragile tendencies seems to prove that they are caused by social conditions rather than biology.

*While drawing on the example of female monarchs is arguably necessary because they are the only women who have been able to occupy positions of power in Western history, there are clearly problems with this approach as well. For better or worse, monarchs are not very representative of the general population. At the same time, the strong admiration people feel for Queen Elizabeth I, for example, may help Mill's case.*



*From a contemporary perspective, it might seem like Mill is pointing out the obvious by laboring so intensely to prove that women are capable of having jobs. At the same time, it is important to remember the context of Mill's contemporary society, in which women held almost zero professional positions. In such stark circumstances, it is perhaps little wonder that people questioned women's capabilities.*



*At this point, Mill's argument is weakened by the extent to which he relies on generalizations and even stereotypes about women, albeit in service of an argument that states that most of these stereotypes are wrong. He provides a compelling account of the reason why people have come to believe in the power of women's "intuition." Yet he undermines this by making sweeping statements about the way women think that denies diversity among women.*



*Again, it might seem strange that Mill is taking stereotypes about women being pragmatic, nervous, and fragile so seriously. But it's important to remember that at the time he is writing (the mid-19th century), these stereotypes are not considered silly clichés but real, obvious facts. Indeed, in a way, it is more effective for Mill to explain how these stereotypes came to exist than to simply refute them entirely.*



Furthermore, both men and women suffer from nervousness, which—if it is biological—must be hereditary and therefore passed down to children of both sexes. Sustained nervousness could also be understood as a form of passion or spirit, which is regularly cited as essential to good leadership. Talented orators have this quality; having it does not necessarily mean that one is less fit for important roles. Even if it is true that women are more emotional than men and less able to focus for a long time on a particular task, there is nothing to say that being able to sustain focus for extended periods should be considered the norm.

If women struggle to sustain attention on a single pursuit, it is perhaps because their lives consist of attending to many small, detailed tasks. When they want to focus on something, they are forced to “steal time” to think about it. Some claim that men’s mental superiority is explained by the fact that men have larger brains—yet this fact is far from an established fact. Furthermore, it is the “activity” of an organ, not its size, that determines its power. For example, it could just as easily be assumed that because men’s bodies are larger, they are less quick and agile than women.

Another important point is that ideas about women, as well as the way women actually behave, both vary between cultures. In England, women are known as being more dependable than men. Furthermore, the behavior of English people tends to be exceptionally dependent on custom, which is far more important than natural inclination. Although it is extremely difficult to know the extent to which gendered characteristics are shaped by biology or social conditions, by studying a person’s characteristics and comparing it against the way they were raised, it is still possible to learn a substantial amount about how social conditions affect gender.

When it comes to assessing how women have contributed to the fields of art, philosophy, and science, it could be argued that no first-rate works in any of these fields has been authored by a woman. At the same time, Sappho is considered to be one of the greatest Ancient Greek poets. At the time Mill is writing, the only manner in which women’s work is inferior to men’s is its lack of originality and innovation. Moreover, it is crucial to remember that across history, women have simply not been given the chance to access the time, space, and materials necessary to create work. Such conditions are essential to producing work that is original and innovative.

*Here, Mill suggests that the negative connotations associated with female characteristics might be more the result of prejudice than reality (although he doesn’t make this point explicitly). He suggests that what might be called “passion” and “spirit” in a man are labelled as nervousness in a woman in order to dismiss women and their capabilities. Similar arguments are made about gender bias to this day.*



*One of the important innovations of The Subjection of Women is that Mill takes the labor women perform in the household seriously as work, rather than dismissing it as duty. He notes that the domestic work women perform strongly affects other aspects of their lives, something that would become a theme of much later feminist thought.*



*This is another key passage wherein Mill foreshadows the arguments made by much more recent feminist theorists. He points out that in a way, even the idea of a “woman” is culturally specific and varies across time and place. This makes it even less likely that stereotypes about female traits are based in objective reality.*



*Some might argue that focusing on whether women are capable of producing works of genius is—if not outright elitist—at least not the primary concern of a general argument for women’s rights. In a way, it doesn’t matter whether women are capable of producing works of philosophy, science, and art that equal those by men (although, of course, today people know that they are). Either way, this shouldn’t affect whether women are afforded basic human rights.*



Only when women have had adequate education and material support to produce their work will it be possible to determine if they are capable of genius equal to men. It is easy to claim that no women have excelled as historians, for example, without pointing out that no women has ever been given the proper resources or training for the role. Of course, it is true that many intelligent people spontaneously develop significant insights. Such insights occur in women too, yet in order for them to be shared with the world the woman in question needs to have the rare good fortune of finding a man who can understand, appreciate, and share the insight.

Furthermore, when a man *does* agree to help publish a woman's thoughts, he often ends up receiving all the credit; if women lived in a society free from men, they would undoubtedly produce knowledge and writing of their own. When people seek to prove that women are naturally less skilled, they often give the example of fine art; unlike other fields, women are encouraged to engage in this pursuit, yet they're often deemed to be less distinguished than male artists. However, while women are encouraged to engage in art as a hobby (and prove themselves to be skilled hobbyists), very few have the chance to pursue it as an actual profession. This means that they generally do not achieve a professional level of skill.

Speaking broadly, women have little time to spare to engage in pursuits such as art or writing, because they are forced to devote so much of their time to the household. Upper-class women who do not have to worry about the practical side of running a household still find that all their attention is taken up by "society" matters. In general, women are expected to always be available to attend to others; their own interests and pursuits are not considered important priorities. As a result, women are forced to carve out time in which to pursue their own interests. It is also possible that women's lack of interest in fame contributes to the sense that they have not contributed much of significance to the field of art.

Women are often said to be morally superior to men—but this is an "empty compliment" considering that if people really believed this, it would likely not be the norm that women had to obey men. At the same time, the stereotype conveys a general awareness of the fact that power has a corrupting effect on men's humanity. It is also worth noting that women generally receive none of the education thought to be central to developing good morality.

*Again, Mill's fixation on whether women's work in the field of history could ever rival men's could be seen as less urgent than most of the other questions he has discussed. At the same time, according to more modern feminist theory, it is important for the most talented and elite women to "break the glass ceiling" of societal limitations in order to pave the way for more ordinary women.*



*It is clear from passages like this that there is a well-worn list of justifications for gender inequality that are regularly cited. Indeed, it is easy to see how sentiments like this could become "common knowledge." Yet Mill, of course, is highly suspicious of common knowledge and definitely doesn't think it should necessarily be trusted as true or accurate. As he reveals in this passage, common knowledge about why women are less capable than men often relies upon highly suspect, flimsy logic.*



*Here, Mill combines a psychological analysis of why women are held back from producing important work with a materialist one (meaning one that's rooted in physical realities). Women feel that they have obligations to others and thus shouldn't spend time on their own pursuits (a psychological issue), and they also don't have enough time or resources to devote to these pursuits either (a material one). Crucially, these two kinds of issues combine to make it especially difficult for women to make significant achievements.*



*Mill is skilled at scrutinizing beliefs and principles that purport to mean one thing but really convey something entirely different. For example, he theorizes that people's disingenuous claims that women are morally superior to men perhaps actually speaks to the corrupting impact of unearned power.*



Neither men nor women typically complain about the existing order of things. The writings of women do tend to express dissatisfaction about the existing order, but they do not place blame on men. For women, the risks of trying to change the current system are too great, and thus it cannot be expected that they fight for their own rights until men join in.

*Mill leaves open the question of whether women truly do not blame men for the oppressive conditions of their lives. He acknowledges the possibility that women perhaps just fear expressing this blame because the risk of doing so is too great.*



## CHAPTER 4

Although it is less important than the other questions discussed in the book thus far, it is worth discussing the question of how human society as a whole would be transformed by women's emancipation. Firstly, there is no doubt that enhancing women's rights would ease the suffering of a large number of individual women mistreated by their husbands. As a social institution that gives men unchecked power over women, marriage is an outdated, unjust institution that should be left in the past, like **slavery**. Yet for some people, hearing about the negative sides of women's oppression is not enough—they also need to be explicitly persuaded that women's emancipation would create a better society.

*It is intriguing that Mill frames the question of how women's emancipation would benefit society as less important than other issues, considering that his entire argument is based on the utilitarian principle of prioritizing the common good. Perhaps he does not want to make it seem as if gender equality is merely a vehicle through which to discuss his general theories about how society should transform.*



Far from being a minor issue, gender is the most common and widespread relation between two sets of people in the world. In that light, Mill claims that all the selfishness that exists in human society has its roots in gendered oppression. Consider the effect when a boy meets a woman who is much smarter and more capable than him, only to learn that he still has absolute authority over her. Situations like this have a profoundly corrupting influence on humanity and encourage men to become arrogant and domineering.

*The argument Mill makes here is significant: it is not just women but also men who suffer under patriarchy. This is because a system that favors men over even those women who are superior to him in certain areas creates a warped and illogical situation. All people rely on principles of justice and reason in order to make sense of the world, and the oppression of women seriously threatens these principles.*



Indeed, it is difficult to even imagine how serious the impact has been of having such an unjust system in place for so long. As long as this system is in place, it will be an "uphill struggle" for men to embrace principles of justice (which are the principles of Christianity). Not only this, but women's emancipation would also mean the doubling of skill and knowledge available to put in service of the greater good. At the moment, women's capabilities are almost wasted on domestic labor alone. If gender inequality were to end, the overall intellectual capacity of humanity would be enhanced. Women's abilities would automatically be strengthened simply because they'd be allowed to pursue whatever interested them.

*Because Mill fervently believes that society functions best when everyone is free to choose their own pursuits, he is confident that extending such freedom would automatically improve the condition of humanity as a whole. Some people disagree with this foundational principle and might instead believe that it works better when all people are obligated to do a little bit of different types of work (including domestic and manual labor) than have everyone choose their pursuits according to their own desires.*



Throughout history, women have had a strong influence on the workings of the world, in part via their roles as mothers of sons. They have significantly helped the spread of Christianity. The desire to impress and honor women was the foundation of chivalry, a practice that Mill describes as one of the pinnacles of morality in human. In today's world, the moral code via which people make decisions ought to be based on justice and respect for the rights of each individual person. A system of punishment is in place to deter people from committing wrongs.

Women still exert a significant influence on the moral system of the present—yet because they still have little knowledge of the world beyond the domestic sphere, they can sometimes regrettably discourage that which is publicly accepted. On the other hand, there are still some positive aspects to women's influence on public life. They encourage pacifism and charitable giving, both of which represent what is morally distinguished about modern European life. At the same time, women's interest in these causes betrays the limitations of their education, which is based in sentimentality rather than real knowledge. This can have the effect of encouraging benevolence that's shallow and empty.

Clearly, women cannot be blamed for these deficiencies, which are provoked by restricted access to education and public life. Indeed, this becomes yet another example of the way in which women's emancipation would be of enormous public benefit. People often say that men of the "classes most exposed to temptation" need their wives to keep them in check. Mill observes that there is probably some truth in this, although it works very differently among the upper classes. Among these people, wives work to ensure that their husbands conform to the general opinion of acceptable behavior. Especially if a wife isn't as intelligent as her husband, he is likely to feel dragged down by her, as she will stop him from living as he wants to.

This can be a special problem for those ranked just below the most elite circles of society. Many women convince themselves that they could certainly move into this elite level (usually erroneously, Mill thinks) if it weren't for their husbands' "low radical politics." This is one of the issues that arises when two very different people end up being married. While it's not true that *all* the differences that emerge between married people are due to the differences in how men and women are raised, this stark gap makes it unlikely that a married couple will find themselves truly agreeing about their preferences and desires. The issue can be resolved by women being totally submissive, but this isn't really a solution at all.

*Here, Mill contests the idea that because women have faced intense restrictions throughout history, they have not contributed to society. He points out that—often in passive or covert ways, such as in the example of chivalry—women have still managed to make positive contributions. If the restrictions placed on them were lifted, then these contributions would become even more numerous.*



*Mill's argument can be difficult to follow here because it speaks to the very specific social climate of the time and place in which he is writing (19th-century England). He is essentially expressing concern over the fact that—in part because they are held back from fully participating in public life—women often end up having highly conventional ideas. They might be less inclined to political radicalism (the kinds of subversive, imaginative views that Mill himself holds) and more inclined to conform.*



*Mill often repeats the assumption (commonly held at the time he is writing) that the working classes are "most exposed to temptation." It was widely believed that the lower-class people tended to be more morally corrupt and naïve than upper-class people—something that readers today would likely take issue with. Here, however, he draws a parallel between the role of women in working-class culture and in the social elite. In both cases, women play a role of encouraging conformity with norms and propriety, which he believes is not necessarily a good thing.*



*This passage reads as though Mill is griping about an issue that personally irritates him rather than making a significant pronouncement about the nature of gender relations as a whole. At the same time, the broader points expressed in this paragraph—notably about how gender oppression drives men and women apart, preventing the pleasures of unity—are significant.*





If women were not oppressed, marriage might more often resemble friendships between people of the same sex, where two people do not agree on everything but nonetheless find that their different natures complimentary and enriching. Overall, difference between two people can be valuable unless one person is intellectually inferior to the other. Even the most intelligent and capable people will lose their insight if they only spend time around people who are their intellectual inferiors.

Marriage is currently changing, thanks to shifting norms such as men participating more in domestic life and women receiving more comprehensive education. At the same time, a problem persists of women holding their husbands' advancement back. Mill states that he will not describe what a marriage between true intellectual equals is like, because those who can't already picture it will not be able to believe it could happen. However, this is the ideal state of marriage and must be the goal that people work toward if humanity is to properly flourish.

The most important benefit of women's emancipation, however, is the happiness it would bring to women themselves. After the basic necessities of survival, freedom is the most important thing for human beings to have. No one would willingly give up their freedom even if meant submitting to the rule of a leader who was competent and fair. All men must remember the feeling of relief and happiness that came when their childhoods ended and they gained autonomy over their old lives—there can be no doubt that women crave the same experience. The desire to have power over others is always going to be conflict with the importance of individual freedom.

It is not just that freedom brings happiness and fulfilment, but also that lacking freedom to pursue one's own wishes creates enormous suffering. Think of the women who devote their entire lives to raising children only to have the children grow up and move away, leaving their mothers bereft of their only "social duty." When people ridicule the idea of women holding political office, they usually suppose that it would be teenagers and young women sitting in Parliament, when it's not common for political office to be held by adolescent men. It is much more reasonable to imagine older women of 40 or 50—who have gained important life experience by raising families—taking political office.

At the moment, society condemns women to a tedious and miserable life, denying them the satisfaction of pursuing something that they find meaningful. This waste of potential is inflicted by law, a situation that amounts to evil and that insults everything that makes human life worth living.

*This passage could be accused of containing traces of elitism, yet the general point it makes is arguably fair. If a man is highly educated and intelligent, why would he want to be with someone he considers his intellectual inferior? Surely it is more satisfying and better for him if his wife is his equal and can challenge him to become better.*



*Some biographical context is useful here: before Mill and his wife, Harriet, married, they were friends for 21 years. Their intellectual collaboration started during this period of friendship and further progressed once they were a married couple. It is obvious, then, how this unusual trajectory gave Mill insight into a more egalitarian and enriching version of marriage.*



*This passage presents a key foundational principle underlying Mill's argument: he believes that freedom is not just an inherent good but the most important inherent good there is. This idea, when applied to women, clashes with the entire ideology of a patriarchal system, which is structured around the notion that it's better for women to be under the control of a benevolent husband (or father) than for them to have their own autonomy.*



*Mill has perhaps not yet reached a point where he can imagine woman who choose to stay childless or men who choose to perform the majority of the labor of childrearing. Nonetheless, the proposal he makes here—that women who have already raised their children would be particularly well-suited to serving in political office—is extremely radical for the 19th-century context in which he is writing.*



*In the concluding passage of the book, Mill reiterates that gendered oppression—because it restricts women's freedom so severely—is a stain on human existence that must be erased.*





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