

The Subjection of Women

John Stuart Mill

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type. The phrase ‘the subjection of women’ occurs quite often in this version, because it helps to keep things clear; in Mill’s original it hardly occurs except in the title. The chapter-titles are added in this version. So are the section-breaks and -titles; these are offered not as formal structure but only as rough guides to where new topics are launched.—As a background to this work, you should know: In 1830 at the age of 24 Mill formed an extremely close moral and intellectual friendship with Mrs Harriet Taylor; this continued, with no sexual impropriety, until her husband died in 1851, whereupon she and Mill married. She died seven years later, and the present work was written a few years after that.

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CHAPTER 4

What good would reform do?

There remains a question that is as important as those I have discussed—a question that will be asked with the most persistent vigour by opponents whose conviction is somewhat shaken on the main point—namely:

What good are we to expect from the changes you propose in our customs and institutions? Would mankind be better off if women were free? If not, why disturb their minds and try to make a social revolution in the name of an abstract right?

This question isn't likely to be asked regarding the proposed change in the condition of women in marriage. The countless instances of suffering, immorality, evils of all sorts that come from the subjection of individual women to individual men are far too terrible to be overlooked. Thoughtless or dishonest people who attend only to cases that are extreme or that receive publicity may say that these evils are 'exceptional'; but no-one can be blind to their existence or (often) to their intensity. And it is perfectly obvious that •the abuse of the power can't be lessened very much while •the power remains. This power is given or offered not to good men or to decently respectable men, but to *all* men, including the most brutal and the most criminal. The only constraint is that of *opinion*, and such men are usually unaffected by any opinion except that of men like themselves. . . . The law of servitude in marriage is a monstrous contradiction to all the principles of the modern world, and to all the experience through which those principles have been slowly and painfully worked out. Now that negro slavery has been abolished, marriage is the only institution in which a human whose faculties are all in excellent order is delivered up to the tender mercies of

another human being, in the hope—yes, really—that this other will use the power solely for the good of the person subjected to it. Marriage is the only actual bondage known to our law. There are no longer any legal slaves except the mistress of every house.

So the question *Cui bono?* [Latin = 'Who will benefit from this?'] is not likely to be asked regarding the reform of the marriage law. We may be told that the evil of such reform would outweigh the good, but there can be no denying that there *would be* good results. In regard to the larger question, however—

- removing women's disabilities,
- recognising them as the equals of men in every aspect of citizenship,
- opening up to them all honourable employments, and
- allowing them to have the training and education that would qualify them for those employments

—for many people it isn't enough that this inequality has no just or legitimate defence; they demand to know what definite positive •advantage would come from abolishing it.

The moral education of males

My first answer is: the •advantage of having the most universal and pervading of all human relations regulated by justice instead of injustice. That bare statement will tell anyone who attaches a moral meaning to words what a *vast* gain this would be for the human condition; it's hardly possible to make it any stronger by any explanation or illustration. All of mankind's selfish propensities, the self-worship, the

unjust self-preference, are rooted in and nourished by the present constitution of the relation between men and women. Think what it does to a boy to grow up to manhood in the belief that—without any merit or any exertion of his own, though he may be the most frivolous and empty or the most ignorant and stolid of mankind—by the mere fact of being born a male he is by right the superior of every one of half the human race. That ‘inferior’ half probably includes some whose real superiority to himself he has daily or hourly occasion to feel! But even if his whole conduct is guided by a woman ‘governess or teacher’, if he is a fool he thinks that of course she isn’t and can’t be his equal in ability and judgment; and if he isn’t a fool he does worse—he sees that she is superior to him, and believes that still he is entitled to command and she is bound to obey. What effect on his character will this lesson have? And men of the cultivated classes are often not aware how deeply the lesson sinks into most male minds. That is because among right-feeling and well-bred people the inequality is kept out of sight as much as possible—especially out of sight of the children. Boys are required to be as obedient to their mother as to their father; they aren’t allowed to domineer over their sisters, and aren’t accustomed to seeing their sisters made subordinate to them; on the contrary, feelings of chivalry towards females are highlighted, while the servitude that requires those feelings is kept in the background. Well brought up youths in the higher classes thus often escape the bad influences of the subordination of women in their early years, and experience them only when they arrive at manhood and fall under the dominion of facts as they really exist. Such people are little aware, regarding a boy who is differently brought up, of

- how early the notion of his inherent superiority to a girl arises in his mind;
- how it grows with his growth and strengthens with

his strength;

- how schoolboys inject it into one another;
- how early the youth thinks himself superior to his mother, owing her patience but no real respect; and
- how lofty and sultan-like a sense of superiority he feels over the woman whom he honours by admitting her to a partnership of his life.

Isn’t it obvious that all this perverts the whole manner of existence of the man, both as an individual and as a social being? It matches a hereditary king’s feeling that he is excellent above others because he was born a king, or a noble because he was born a noble. The relation between husband and wife is like that between lord and vassal, except that the wife is held to more unlimited obedience than the vassal was. The vassal’s character may have been affected for better and for worse by his subordination, but it is obvious that the lord’s character was affected greatly for the worse. If he came to believe that his vassals were really superior to himself, or to feel that he was given command over people as good as himself, through no merits or labours of his own but merely for having. . . . taken the trouble to be born, ‘*still* the situation will have harmed his character’. The self-worship of the monarch or of the feudal lord is matched by the self-worship of the male. Anyone who grows up from childhood with unearned distinctions is bound to become conceited and self-congratulatory about them, this being the worst sort of pride. . . . And when the feeling of being raised above the whole of the other sex is combined with personal authority over one woman, the situation ‘may be ‘educational’ in either of two ways’. **(1)** To men whose strongest points of character are conscience and affection, the marriage may be •a school of conscientious and affectionate gentleness and patience, but **(2)** to men of a different sort it will be •a regularly constituted College for training them in arrogance

and overbearingness. . . .

Basing domestic existence on a relation that conflicts with the first principles of social justice—think about the example this sets and the education that it gives to the sentiments! The very nature of man ensures that it will have such an enormous perverting influence that we can hardly even *imagine* the enormous improvement that would come about if the unjust basis for marriage were removed. Everything that education and civilisation are doing to erase the influences on character of the law of force, and replace them by influences of the law of justice, remains merely on the surface as long as the enemy's stronghold is not attacked. The principle of the modern movement in morals and politics is that what entitles someone to respect is his conduct and nothing else; that men's claim to deference comes not from what they are but from what they do; that (above all) the only rightful claim to power and authority comes from merit, not birth. If no human being were given permanent authority over any other, society wouldn't be employed in building up with one hand character-traits that it has to curb with the other. For the first time in man's existence on earth, the child would really be trained in the way he should go, and when he grew up there would be a chance of his staying on that path. But so long as •the right of the strong to have power over the weak rules in the very heart of society, the attempt to get people's conduct to be guided by •the principle of equal rights for the weak will always be an uphill struggle. . . .

Doubling the brain pool

The second benefit to be expected from giving to women the free use of their abilities by leaving them free to choose their employments and opening up to them the same range of occupation and the same rewards and encouragements as

other human beings have, would be *doubling the supply of abilities available for the higher service of humanity*. Where there is now **one** person qualified to benefit mankind. . . . as a public teacher or an administrator of some branch of public or social affairs, there would then be a chance of **two**. As things now stand, there is a terrific shortage of people who are competent to do excellently anything that needs any significant amount of ability to do; so that the world suffers a serious loss by refusing to make use of half the talent it possesses. It's true that this amount of mental power isn't totally lost: much of it is employed, and would in any case be employed, in domestic management and in the few other occupations open to women; and the personal influence of individual women over individual men brings some indirect benefit to other activities. But these benefits are partial; their range is extremely narrow; and if you insist on •deducting them from the total amount of fresh social power that would be gained by liberating women, then you must •add to that total the benefit of the stimulus that men's intellects would get from the competition •posed by liberated women. . . .

This great gain for the intellectual power of our species. . . . would come partly through better and more complete intellectual education of women, which would then improve in step with the improvement of men's. Women in general would be brought up with the same ability to understand business, public affairs, and the higher matters of theorising as men in the same class of society; and the select few of either sex who were qualified not only to understand the work and thought of others but to think or do something considerable themselves would get the same help in improving and training their capacities. In this way, the widening of women's sphere of action would operate for good, by raising their education to the level of men's and making it share in all improvements made men's education. But

independently of all this, merely breaking down the barrier would have an educational virtue of the highest worth. The mere getting rid of the idea that

all the wider subjects of thought and action, all the things that are of general and not solely of private interest, are men's business from which women are to be warned off—positively debarred from most of it and coldly tolerated in the little that is allowed them—

the mere consciousness a woman would then have of being a human being like any other, entitled to choose her pursuits, urged or invited. . . .to interest herself in whatever is interesting to human beings, entitled to have her opinion (like any other) taken account of in human concerns, whether or not she tried to participate in them—this alone would enormously expand women's faculties while also broadening the range of their moral sentiments.

The moral influence of women: chivalry

So the liberation of women would double the amount of individual talent available for the conduct of human affairs, which certainly aren't at present so rich in able guidance that they can afford to do without half of what nature offers! The result of that would be that women's opinions would have a more beneficial influence than they now do on the general mass of human belief and sentiment. A 'more beneficial' rather than a 'greater' influence? Yes, because women's influence over the general tone of opinion has always—or at least from the earliest known period—been very considerable. •Mothers' influence on the early character of their sons, and the •desire of young men to be liked by young women, have throughout history been important factors in the formation of character, and have determined some of the chief steps in the progress of civilisation. Even in the Homeric age, the

great Hector acknowledged being powerfully motivated by his concern for how he would appear to the Trojan women. [Mill says this by quoting a line from Homer's Greek.] The moral influence of women has worked in two ways. **(1)** It has been a softening influence. Those who were most liable to be the victims of violence have naturally tended as much as they could towards limiting its scope and cutting back its excesses. Those who were not taught to fight have naturally tended to favour any way of settling differences other than fighting. In general, those who have suffered most from others' giving free rein to their selfish passions have naturally been the most earnest supporters of any moral law that offered a way of controlling passion. Women were powerfully instrumental in inducing the northern conquerors to adopt the creed of Christianity, a creed so much more favourable to women than any that preceded it. The conversion of the Anglo-Saxons and of the Franks may be said to have been begun by the wives of Ethelbert and Clovis. **(2)** Women's opinions have conspicuously given a powerful stimulus to the qualities in men that women needed their protectors to have because they weren't themselves trained in them. Courage and the other military virtues have always been greatly indebted to men's wish to be admired by women; and this mechanism works for far more than just this one class of eminent qualities, because. . . .being thought highly of by men has always been the best passport to the admiration and favour of women.

The combination of **(1-2)** those two kinds of moral influence by women gave birth to the spirit of *chivalry*, the special feature of which is that it aims at combining the highest standard of **(2)** the warlike qualities with **(1)** the development of gentleness, generosity, and self-denial towards the non-military and defenseless classes generally, with a special submission and worship directed towards

women. What distinguished women from the other defenceless classes was their power to give high rewards to those who tried to earn their favour rather than forcing them into obedience. The practice of chivalry fell sadly short of its theoretical standard—even more than practice generally falls below theory!—and yet it remains one of the most precious monuments of humanity’s moral history. It was a remarkable example of an organised joint effort by a most disorganised and distracted society to raise up and act on a moral ideal greatly in advance of its social condition and institutions. It was indeed so far in advance that it was completely frustrated in the main objective; and yet it was never entirely ineffective, and has left its mark—a very detectable and (for the most part) highly valuable mark—on the ideas and feelings of all subsequent times.

The chivalrous ideal is the high point of women’s influence on the moral development of mankind; and if women are to remain in subjection it is lamentable that the chivalrous standard has passed away, because it’s the only standard that has any power to alleviate the demoralising influences of the subjection of women. But changes in the general state of mankind made it inevitable that the chivalrous ideal of morality would be replaced by a totally different one. Chivalry tried to infuse moral elements into a state of society in which everything depended for good or evil on individual strength and skill, under the softening influences of individual delicacy and generosity. In modern societies everything . . . is settled not by individual effort but by the combined operations of many people, and society’s main occupation has changed from fighting to business, from military to industrial life. The demands of this new life don’t rule out the virtues of generosity, any more than the demands of the old life did, but the new life doesn’t entirely depend on them as the old life did. The main foundations

of the moral life of modern times must be

- justice: each person’s respect for the rights of every other person, and
- prudence: each person’s ability to take care of himself.

Chivalry didn’t erect legal barriers to any of the forms of wrong that reigned unpunished throughout society; the most it achieved in that line was to steer the instruments of praise and admiration in such a way as to encourage a few men to do right in preference to wrong. But what morality must really depend on are its penal sanctions—its power to *deter* people from acting badly. The security of society cannot rest merely on *honouring* right behaviour: that is a relatively weak motive in most people, and in some it has no force at all. Modern society can repress all kinds of wrong conduct by an appropriate use of the superior strength that civilisation has given it, and thus make life tolerable for the weaker members of society (who are no longer defenseless but protected by law), doing this without having to rely on the chivalrous feelings of those who are in a position to tyrannise. The beauties and graces of the chivalrous character are still what they always were, but the rights of the weak and the general comfort of human life now rest on a far surer and steadier support. Or, rather, they do so in every relation of life except the marriage relation.

The moral influence of women: charity

The moral influence of women these days is just as real as it used to be, but it is no longer so marked and definite: it has moved nearer to being merged in the general influence of public opinion. [Regarding the phrase ‘the contagion of sympathy’: The root meaning of ‘sympathy’ is ‘feeling with’; in early modern times the word covered kinds of going-along-with that didn’t involve feelings at all—e.g. a violin’s G-string starts vibrating because another nearby

G-string has been plucked. Mill is thinking about feelings, of course, but not only feeling for people's misfortunes: in his day someone's sharing a friend's pleasure could be called 'sympathy'. You can see why he used 'contagion'; he wasn't implying that there is anything wrong with sympathy.] Both through the contagion of sympathy, and through men's wish to shine in the eyes of women, the feelings of women have great effect in keeping alive what remains of the chivalrous ideal—in encouraging the feelings and continuing the traditions and spirit of generosity. In these aspects of character, women's standard is higher than men's; in the quality of justice, it is somewhat lower. As regards the relations of private life, the influence of women is—broadly speaking, but with some individual exceptions—encouraging to the softer virtues, discouraging to the sterner ones. Virtue's biggest trials in the concerns of life involve •the conflict between interest and principle; and women's influence •in these is of a very mixed character. When the principle involved happens to be one of the very few that women's religious or moral education has strongly impressed on them, they are powerful aids to virtue; and their husbands and sons are often prompted by them to acts of self-denial that they couldn't have performed without that stimulus. But the moral principles that have been impressed on women, given their present education and position, cover only a small proportion of the field of virtue, and they are principally negative—forbidding particular acts but having little to do with the ·positive· direction of thoughts and purposes. I'm afraid it must be said that women's influence does little to encourage or support the devotion of the energies to purposes that don't promise private advantages to the family. It is small blame to them that they discourage projects of which they haven't learnt to see the advantage, and which take their men away from them and from the interests of the family. But the consequence is that women's influence is

often anything but favourable to public virtue.

But they do today have some influence in setting the tone for public moralities; that has been the case since their sphere of action has been a little widened and a good many of them have worked to promote objectives that stretch beyond their own family and household. The influence of women counts for a great deal in two of the most marked features of modern European life—its aversion to war, and its addiction to philanthropy. Excellent characteristics both; but unfortunately the influence of women, while it is valuable in encouraging these feelings in general, does at least as much harm as good in the directions in which it steers them. On the philanthropic side more particularly, the two areas chiefly cultivated by women are •religious missionary-work and •charity. Religious missions at home are merely ways of making religious animosities even more bitter; and foreign missions usually involve blindly running at an object without either knowing or caring about the fatal harms—fatal to the religious purpose itself as well as to any other desirable purpose—which may be produced by the means the missionaries employ. As for charity: that is an affair in which •the immediate effect on the persons directly concerned are apt to be completely at war with •the ultimate consequence to the general good; and women can't see and are unwilling to admit the ultimately harmful tendency of any form of charity or philanthropy that commends itself to their sympathetic feelings. This is result of •their education—which educates their feelings rather than their understanding—and of •the habit that their whole life has instilled in them of looking to immediate effects on individuals and not to more distant effects on classes of people. The large and growing mass of unenlightened and shortsighted benevolence, which,

by taking the care of people's lives out of their own hands and relieving them from the disagreeable conse-

quences of their own acts, undermines the very foundations of the self-respect, self-help, and self-control that are essential both for individual prosperity and for social virtue

—this waste of resources and of benevolent feelings in doing harm instead of good, is immensely increased by women's contributions and stimulated by their influence. This mistake isn't likely to be made by women who have the practical management of projects for helping people. It sometimes happens that women who administer public charities recognise clearly the demoralising influence of the help that is given, and could give lessons on this to many a male political economist. (They are brought to this recognition by an ability that women usually have more than men do, namely insight into present fact, and especially into the minds and feelings of those with whom they are in immediate contact.) But women who only give their money, and aren't brought face to face with the effects it produces—how can they be expected to foresee the effects? If a woman is born to the present lot of women, and is content with it, how is she to appreciate the value of self-dependence? She is not self-dependent; she is not taught self-dependence; her destiny is to receive everything from others, and why should what is good enough for her be bad for the poor? The notions of good that she is familiar with are of blessings descending from a superior. She forgets that •she isn't free and that the poor are; that •if what they need is given to them unearned, they can't be compelled to earn it; that •everybody can't be taken care of by everybody, but people need some motive to take care of themselves; and that •the only charity that turns out in the long run to *be* charity is: helping people to help themselves if they are physically able to do so.

If women were socially and politically emancipated, they would be better educated and would have more practical

experience of the things that their opinions influence; and the points I have been making show that those changes would improve the part that women take in the formation of general opinion. I now go on to argue that an even more remarkable improvement would be made in the influence each woman has within her own family.

The moral influence of wives on husbands

It is often said that in the classes that are most exposed to temptation, a man's wife and children tend to keep him honest and respectable—through his wife's direct influence and his concern for the family's future welfare. No doubt this is often the case, with men who are more weak than wicked; and this beneficial influence would be preserved and strengthened under laws that put the wife on a level with her husband. . . . But when we go higher in the social scale, we encounter a totally different set of moving forces. The wife's influence tends. . . .to prevent the husband from •falling below the country's common standard of approval; and it tends quite as strongly to hinder him from •rising above it. The wife is the assistant of common public opinion. A man who is married to a woman who is his inferior in intelligence finds her a perpetual dead weight—or, even worse, a *drag*—on every active wish he has to be better than public opinion requires him to be. It is hardly possible for someone who is in these bonds to achieve a really high level of virtue. If a man differs in his opinion from the mass—if he sees truths that haven't yet dawned on them, or if he would like to act more conscientiously than most people do on truths that they all nominally recognise but don't feel in their hearts as he does—to all such thoughts and desires marriage is the heaviest of drawbacks, unless the lucky man has a wife who is as much above the common level as he is.

One reason for this is that there is always some sacrifice of personal interest required, either of social status or of money, perhaps even a risk to the means of subsistence. A man may be willing to confront these sacrifices and risks for himself, but he will hesitate to impose them on his family. In this context, 'his family' refers to his wife and daughters; for he always hopes that his sons will feel as he does, and that anything he can do without they will also do without, willingly, in the same cause. But his daughters are in a different situation: their marriage may depend on it. And if his wife

- can't enter into or understand the objectives for which these sacrifices are made,
- if she thought them worth any sacrifice, would think so solely for his sake and taking his word for it, and
- couldn't join in any of the enthusiasm or self-approval that he may feel, when the things that he is disposed to sacrifice are everything to her,

won't the best and most unselfish man be the most reluctant to bring this consequence down on his wife? And if what is at stake is not the comforts of life but only social status, the burden on his conscience and feelings is still very severe. Anyone who has a wife and children has given hostages to Mrs. Grundy [a character in an 18th century play, embodying the thoughts and feelings of conventional society, especially attitudes of prudish disapproval]. The approval of that potentate may not matter to him but it is of great importance to his wife. The man may be above that sort of thing, or he may feel sufficiently compensated by the approval of those of his own way of thinking. But he has no compensation to offer the women connected with him. The almost invariable tendency of the wife to throw the weight of her influence on the side of social status is sometimes made a reproach to women, and represented as a streak of weakness and

childishness in their character, but that is surely most unfair. Society makes the whole life of a woman in the easy classes [Mill's phrase] a continual self-sacrifice; it exacts from her an unceasing restraint of all her natural inclinations; and the only return it makes to her for what often amounts to a *martyrdom* is consideration [= 'social acceptance and respect']. Her consideration is inseparably tied to her husband's; and after paying the full price for it she finds that she is threatened with losing it for no reason that she can feel to be valid. Having sacrificed her whole life to it, she's not going to let her husband sacrifice it to a whim, a caprice, an eccentricity—something not recognised or allowed for by the world, and which the world will agree with her in thinking to be at best a folly. This dilemma is hardest on the very meritorious man who doesn't have talents that qualify him to be prominent among those whose opinion he shares, but who holds his opinion from conviction and feels bound in honour and conscience to serve it by professing his belief and giving his time, labour, and means to anything undertaken on its behalf. It is hardest of all when such a man happens to be of a rank and position that doesn't automatically include him in what is considered the best society but does debar him from it either. His admission to the best society depends mainly on what people think of him personally—and his being identified with opinions and public conduct unacceptable to those who set the tone for society would operate as an effective barrier. Many a woman soothes herself with the thought (nine times out of ten a wrong thought) that nothing prevents her and her husband from moving in the highest society of her neighbourhood—society in which others well known to her, and in the same class of life, mix freely—except that her husband is unfortunately a dissenter [= 'a non-Anglican protestant'], or has the reputation of mingling in low radical politics. . . . With such an influence

in every house, either exerted actively or operating all the more powerfully for not being asserted, is it any wonder that people in general are kept down to the middling level of respectability that is becoming a marked feature of modern times?

The moral effects of difference

Let us look now not at women's disabilities directly but at the broad line of difference those disabilities create between a woman's education and character and a man's. The *difference* has very harmful consequences; indeed, nothing can be more unfavourable to the union of thoughts and inclinations that is the ideal of married life. An intimate relation between people who are radically unlike one another?—that is an idle dream! Unlikeness may attract, but likeness is what retains; and the more alike a couple are the better fitted they are to give each other a happy life. While women are so unlike men, it's not surprising that selfish men should feel the need to have arbitrary power in their own hands, to stop a life-long conflict of inclinations before it gets started, by deciding every issue on the side of their own preference. When people are extremely unlike, they can't have any real identity of interest. Very often a married couple have a conscientious difference of opinion concerning the highest points of duty. Is there any reality in the marriage union where this is the case? Yet it is common enough wherever a married woman has any earnestness of character; and it is *very* common in Catholic countries, when the wife is supported in her dissent by the only other authority to which she is taught to bow, the priest. With the usual barefacedness of power that isn't used to being challenged, the influence of priests over women is attacked by Protestant and Liberal writers, less for being bad in itself than because •it is a rival to

the husband's authority, and •raises up a revolt against his infallibility. . . . When there is no difference of moral or religious opinion, mere differences of taste can detract greatly from the happiness of married life. [Differences of taste, Mill says, are created by differences in education. Girls are trained in music, dancing etc. rather than (he implies) spending that time and energy on an education more like their brothers'; and although that may 'stimulate the amatory propensities of men' it creates differences that aren't conducive to married happiness. He continues:] If the married pair are well-bred and well-behaved, they tolerate each other's tastes; but is mutual *toleration* what people look forward to when they enter into marriage? These differences of inclination will naturally make their wishes different, if not restrained by affection or duty, with regard to almost all domestic questions that arise. What a difference there must be in the society the spouses will wish to frequent! Each will want associates who share his or her own tastes; the persons agreeable to one will be indifferent or positively disagreeable to the other; yet all their associates must be common to both, because married people these days don't live in different parts of the house and have totally different visiting lists. . . . They can't help having different wishes about the upbringing of the children: each will want to see reproduced in the children his or her own tastes and sentiments; and either there is a compromise, giving only half satisfaction to each, or the wife has to yield—often with bitter suffering. . . .

It would of course be foolish to suppose that these differences of feeling and inclination exist only because women are brought up differently from men. Obviously there would be some differences of taste under any imaginable circumstances. But it isn't foolish to say that the difference in upbringing immensely increases those differences and makes them wholly inevitable. While women are brought up

as they are, a man and a woman will rarely find themselves in real agreement of tastes and wishes regarding daily life. They will generally have to give up as hopeless the attempt to have in their private daily life the *idem velle, idem nolle* [Latin = 'same desires, same dislikes'] which is the recognised bond of any society that really is a society. [See note on 'society' on page 22.] Or the man succeeds in obtaining it by choosing a woman who is so complete a nullity that she has no *velle* or *nolle* at all, and is as ready to go along with one thing as with another if anybody tells her to do so. Even this calculation of the man's is apt to fail; dullness and lack of spirit are not always a guarantee of the submission that is so confidently expected from them. But even if they were, is *this* the ideal of marriage? What in this case does the man get by marriage except an upper servant, a nurse, or a mistress? On the other hand, when each of two persons instead of being a nothing is a something; when they are attached to one another and are not too unlike to begin with; the constant shared experience of the same things, assisted by their sympathy [see note on page 51], draws out the latent capacities of each for being interested in the things that were at first interesting only to the other. This produces a gradual assimilation of their tastes and characters to one another, partly by the gradual modification of each but more by a real enriching of the two natures, each acquiring the tastes and capacities of the other in addition to its own. This often happens between two friends of the same sex who are much in one another's company in their daily life: and it would be common in marriage if it weren't that the totally different bringing up of the two sexes make it nearly impossible to form a really well-suited union. If this were remedied, whatever differences there might still be in individual tastes, there would usually be complete unity and unanimity regarding the great objectives of life. When spouses both care for great

objectives, and help and encourage each other in anything concerning these, the minor matters on which their tastes may differ are not all-important to them; and there's a basis for solid friendship of an enduring character, more likely than anything else to make it a lifelong greater pleasure for each to give pleasure to the other than to receive it.

The moral effects of inferiority

So much for the effects of mere unlikeness between the wife and the husband on the pleasures and benefits of marriage; but the power for bad is vastly increased when the unlikeness is inferiority. When unlikeness is merely difference of good qualities, it may be more a benefit in the way of mutual improvement than a drawback from comfort. When each spouse wants and tries to acquire the other's special qualities, the difference between them doesn't drive their interests apart but rather pulls them together, making each spouse still more valuable to the other. But when one of them has much less mental ability and cultivation than the other, and isn't actively trying with the other's aid to rise to the other's level, this marriage will have a wholly bad influence on the mental development of abler of the two; and even more in a reasonably happy marriage than in an unhappy one. Someone who shuts himself up with an inferior, choosing that inferior as his one completely intimate associate, is doing himself harm. Any society that isn't improving is deteriorating: and the closer and more familiar it is, the more it deteriorates. Even a really superior man, in nearly all cases, begins to deteriorate when he is habitually (as the phrase is) 'king of his company', and someone whose habitual 'company' is a wife who is inferior to him is always 'king' of it. While his self-satisfaction is constantly ministered to on the one hand, on the other he

unconsciously acquires the ways of feeling and of looking at things that belong to a more ordinary or a more limited mind than his own. [Mill goes on to say that this 'evil' in marriages, unlike many others that he has discussed, is becoming worse, because men are increasingly pulling away from 'the rough amusements and convivial excesses that formerly occupied most men in their hours of relaxation' and spend correspondingly more time with 'the home and its inmates'. He continues:] The improvement that has been made in women's education has made them in some degree capable of being men's companions in ideas and mental taste, but it still leaves most women hopelessly inferior to their spouses. What generally happens, then, is that the husband's desire for mental communion is satisfied by a communion from which he learns nothing. An unimproving and unstimulating companionship is substituted for (what he might otherwise have been forced to seek) the society of men whose abilities equal his and who share his interest in the higher pursuits. Thus, we see that very promising young men usually stop improving as soon as they marry, and when they don't improve they inevitably degenerate. If the wife doesn't push the husband forward, she always holds him back. He stops caring for what she doesn't care for; he no longer wants—and eventually he dislikes and avoids—the company of people who share his former aspirations. . . ., and his higher faculties of mind and of heart are no longer called into activity. This change coincides with the new and selfish interests that are created by the family, so that after a few years he doesn't differ significantly from those who never did have any higher aspirations.

When two persons of high ability, identical in opinions and purposes, have the best kind of equality—

similarity of powers and capacities, with each being superior to the other in some things, so that each

can enjoy the luxury of looking up to the other, and they can take turns in the pleasure of leading and the pleasure of being led in the path of development

—I shan't try to describe what that marriage will be like. Those who can conceive it don't need my description; those who can't conceive it would brush off my description as the raving of a fanatic. But I am deeply convinced that that this, and *only* this, is the ideal of marriage; and that all opinions, customs, and institutions that favour any other notion of marriage, or turn the ideas and aims connected with marriage into any other direction. . . .are relics of primitive barbarism. The moral renewal of mankind won't really start until the most basic of all social relations is placed under the rule of equal justice, and human beings learn to develop their strongest sympathy with someone who is their equal in rights and in cultivation.

Benefits to the individual woman

Up to here I have discussed the social rather than the individual benefits that would come from abolishing the subjection of women; . . .but it would be a grievous understatement of the case to omit the most direct benefit of all, the indescribably great gain in the private happiness of members of the liberated half of the species [Mill's phrase]—the difference *to them* between a life of subjection to the will of others and a life of rational freedom. After the basic needs for food and clothing, freedom is the first and strongest want of human nature. While mankind are lawless, they want lawless freedom. When they have learned to understand the meaning of •duty and the value of •reason, they are increasingly inclined to be guided and restrained by •these in the exercise of their freedom; but that doesn't mean that they desire freedom less; they don't become disposed to

accept the will of other people as the representative and interpreter of those guiding principles of duty and reason. On the contrary, the communities in which reason has been most cultivated and the idea of social duty has been most powerful are the very ones that have most strongly asserted the freedom of action of the individual—the liberty of each person to govern his conduct by his own feelings of duty, and by such laws and social restraints as his own conscience can subscribe to.

Anyone who wants a sound sense of the worth of personal independence as an ingredient in happiness should consider how *he* values it as an ingredient in *his own* happiness. What a man judges for himself on this subject—as much as on any subject—differs from what he judges for other people. When he hears others complaining that they aren't allowed freedom of action—that their own will has too little influence in the regulation of their affairs—he is inclined to ask: 'What are their grievances?' 'What positive damage are they suffering?' 'How do they think their affairs are mismanaged?'; and if they can't answer these questions in a way that seems to him to be adequate, he turns a deaf ear, and regards their complaint as the fanciful querulousness of people whom nothing reasonable will satisfy. But he has a quite different standard of judgment when he is deciding for himself. In that case, *faultless* administration of his interests by a tutor who has been set over him doesn't satisfy his feelings: the sheer fact of his personal exclusion from the deciding authority is the greatest grievance of all, removing any need to go into the question of mismanagement. It is the same with nations. What citizen of a free country would listen to any offers of good and skilful government in return for the abdication of freedom? Even if he believed •that good and skilful administration *can* exist among a people ruled by a will not their own—•better and more skillful, indeed,

than his country now has—his feelings about the rough and imperfect handling of public affairs is compensated for by his sense that he and his fellow-citizens are working out their own destiny under their own moral responsibility. Well, whatever he feels about this, he can be sure that women feel it just as much. Whatever has been said or written, from the time of Herodotus [the first historian] to the present, about the ennobling influence of free government—

- the nerve and spring that it gives to all the faculties,
- the larger and higher objectives that it presents to the intellect and feelings,
- the more unselfish public spirit, and calmer and broader views of duty, that it creates, and
- the higher platform on which it elevates the individual as a moral, spiritual, and social being

—is every bit as true of women as of men. Aren't these things an important part of individual happiness? Let any man recall what he felt on emerging from boyhood—from the tutelage and control of even loved and affectionate elders—and entering on the responsibilities of manhood. Wasn't it like the physical effect of taking off a heavy weight. . . .? Didn't he feel twice as alive, twice as much a human being, as before? *And does he imagine that women have none of these feelings?* [Mill goes on to say that personal pride is all-important to men although they don't take it seriously in others. Women have their pride also, and when it is thwarted the energies behind it flow in other directions:] An active and energetic mind, if denied •liberty, will seek •power; refused the command of itself, it will assert its personality by trying to control others. To allow to any human beings no existence of their own except what depends on others is motivating them to bend others to their purposes. Where liberty can't be hoped for, and power can, power becomes the grand object of human desire. . . . Hence women's passion for

personal beauty, and dress and display, and all the evils that flow from that. . . . The love of power and the love of liberty are in eternal antagonism. Where there is least liberty, the passion for power is the most ardent and unscrupulous. The desire for power over others can't cease to be a depraving agency among mankind until each individual human being can do without it, and that can't happen until respect for each person's liberty is an established principle.

But it is not only through the sense of personal dignity that the free direction and disposal of their own faculties is a source of individual happiness, and to be fettered and restricted in it is a source of unhappiness, to human beings, and not least to women. Apart from disease, extreme poverty, and guilt, nothing is as fatal to the pleasurable enjoyment of life as the lack of something worthwhile to *do*. While a woman has the care of a family, that provides an outlet for her active faculties, and usually that is enough. But what about the ever-increasing number of women who have had no opportunity of exercising the vocation that they are mocked by telling them is their proper one [i.e. women who have no families]? What about the women whose children •have been lost to them by death or distance, or •have grown up, married, and formed homes of their own? There are many examples of men who after a life taken up by business retire with a pension. . . .and find that their change to a life of inactivity brings boredom, depression, and premature death; their trouble being their inability to acquire new interests and excitements to replace the old. Yet no-one thinks of the parallel case of so many worthy and devoted women, who,

- having paid what they are told is their debt to society,
- having brought up a family blamelessly to manhood and womanhood,
- having kept house as long as they had a house needing to be kept,

are deserted by the only occupation they have fitted themselves for, and are left with undiminished activeness but with no use to make of it, unless perhaps a daughter or daughter-in-law is willing to let them do the same work in her own younger household. . . . For women like these, and for others who have never had this task. . . .the only resources, speaking generally, are religion and charity. But their religion, though it may be one of feeling and of ceremonies, can't be a religion of action except in the form of charity. Many of these women are by nature admirably fitted for charitable work; but to practise charity usefully—indeed, to practise charity without doing harm—one needs the education, the skills, the knowledge and the thinking powers of a skilful administrator. Anyone who is fit to do useful charitable work could perform almost any of the administrative functions of government. In this as in other cases (notably the education of children), the duties permitted to women can't be performed properly unless they are trained for duties that (to the great loss of society) they aren't allowed to perform.

Let me point out here the strange way in which the question of women's disabilities is often presented by people who, confronted by the prospect of something they don't like, find it easier to draw a ludicrous picture of it than to answer the arguments for it. When it is suggested that women's executive capacities and prudent advice might sometimes be valuable in affairs of State, these lovers of *fun* hold up to the ridicule of the world a picture of girls in their teens or young wives in their early twenties being transported bodily, exactly as they are, from the drawing-room to the House of Commons or the Cabinet room. They forget that males aren't usually selected at this early age for a seat in Parliament or for responsible political functions. Common sense, if they had any, would tell them that if such trusts were confided to women it would be to •women with no

special vocation for married life, or women who choose some other employment of their abilities, . . . or more often perhaps widows or wives of forty or fifty who could, with the aid of appropriate studies, make available to the wider world the knowledge of life and skill in government that they have acquired in their families. In every European country the ablest men have often experienced and keenly appreciated the advice and help of clever and experienced women of the world, in achieving both private and of public objectives; and there are important aspects of public administration in which few men are as competent as such women—e.g. the detailed control of expenditure. But my present topic is not society's need for women's services in public business, but the dull and hopeless life it condemns them to by forbidding them to exercise the practical abilities that many of them are conscious of having, in any wider field than one that is now closed to some of them and to others was never open. If there is anything vitally important to the happiness of human beings it is that they should like what they habitually do. This requirement for an enjoyable life is very imperfectly granted, or entirely denied, to a large part of mankind; and because of the lack of it many a life that seems to have everything needed for success is actually a failure. But if such failures are often inevitable now, because of circumstances that society isn't yet skilful enough to overcome, society needn't itself inflict them! Many men spend their lives doing one thing reluctantly and badly when they could have done other things happily and well; this may come about through bad choices by parents, or a youth's own inexperience, or the absence of opportunities for the congenial vocation and their presence for an uncongenial one.

But on women this sentence is imposed by actual law, and by customs equivalent to law. What in unenlightened societies colour, race, religion, or nationality are to some men, sex is to all women—an abrupt exclusion from almost all honourable occupations except ones that others can't perform or aren't willing to perform. Sufferings arising from this cause usually meet with so little sympathy that few people realize how much unhappiness is produced, even now, by the feeling of a wasted life. This will happen even more frequently when increased cultivation [Mill's word] creates a greater and greater disproportion between women's ideas and abilities and the scope that society allows for their activity.

When we consider the positive evil caused to the disqualified half of the human race. . . first in the loss of the most inspiring and elevating kind of personal enjoyment, and then in the weariness, disappointment, and profound dissatisfaction with life that are so often the substitute for it, one feels that among all the lessons that men [here = 'human beings'] need to learn for carrying on the struggle against the inevitable imperfections of their lot on earth, no lesson is more needed than **not to add to the evils that nature inflicts by their jealous and prejudiced restrictions on one another**. Their stupid fears only substitute other and worse evils for the ones that they are lazily anxious about; while every restraint on the freedom of conduct of any of their human fellow-creatures (otherwise than by making them responsible for any evil actually caused by their conduct) does its bit towards drying up the principal fountain of human happiness, and leaves our species less rich. . . in all that makes life valuable to the individual human being.