

# 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 1

### The question can be raised

The object of this Essay is to explain as clearly as I can the reasons for following proposition:

The principle that regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong itself, and is now one of the chief obstacles to human improvement; and •it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality that doesn't allow any power or privilege on one side or disability on the other.

•For convenience I'll call this 'the Opinion'. I have accepted the Opinion from the earliest time when I had *any* views on social political matters; and instead of being weakened or modified •through the years• it has grown steadily stronger •in my mind• through reflection and my experience of life.

The task I am undertaking here will be hard work. . . . But don't think that the difficulty must come from the scarcity or obscurity of solid reasons for the Opinion. Rather, the difficulty is one that exists whenever something is being defended against a mass of *feeling*. Just because the opposing view is strongly rooted in feelings, it is •psychologically• strengthened rather than weakened by having the weight of argument go against it. If it were accepted as a result of argument, counter-arguments might shake the solidity of the conviction; but when it rests solely on feeling, •arguments against it don't shake it at all•: the worse it fares in the clash of arguments, the more convinced its adherents are that their feeling must have some deeper basis that the arguments don't reach! And while the feeling remains, it keeps erecting fresh walls of argument to repair the gaps that have been made in the old ones. And there are so

many factors giving intensity and deep roots to the feelings connected with our present subject—making them more intense and deeper-rooted than the feelings that gather protectively around •other old institutions and customs—that we shouldn't be surprised to find those feelings to be less undermined and loosened than any of the •others by the progress of the great modern spiritual and social transition; nor should we suppose that the barbarisms to which men cling longest must be less barbaric than the ones they shake off earlier.

Those who attack an almost universal opinion are faced with difficulties all the way. They have to be very lucky *and* unusually able if they are to get a hearing at all. It is harder for them to obtain a •trial than it is for any other litigants to obtain a •verdict. And if they do get a hearing, it subjects them to a set of logical requirements totally different from the ones imposed on other people. **(1)** In all other cases, the burden of proof is supposed to lie with the affirmative: if someone is accused of murder, it's up to his accusers to prove his guilt, not for him to prove his innocence. If there's a difference of opinion about the reality of an alleged historical event that doesn't involve strong feelings in anyone—the Siege of Troy, for example—those who say that it did happen are expected to produce their proofs before the other side can be required to say anything; and the most they are ever required to do is to show that the evidence produced by their opponents is of no value. **(2)** Again, in practical matters [i.e. in moral, social and political matters] the burden of proof is supposed to be with those who are against liberty—those who contend for. . . •any limitation of the general freedom

of human action or •anything that denies to one person or kind of person any privilege or advantage that others have. The *a priori* presumption is in favour of freedom and impartiality. It is held that there should be no restraint except what is required by the general good, and that the law should. . . .treat everyone alike except where dissimilarity of treatment is required by positive reasons of justice or of policy. [To say that there is a 'presumption' in favour of a practice is to say that the practice should be regarded as justifiable unless a case is made against its being so; the stronger the presumption, the stronger the counter-case has to be.]

But none of these rules of evidence will be allowed to benefit those who maintain the Opinion that I shall defend. It is useless for me to say:

Those who maintain that men have a right to command and women an obligation obey, or that men are fit for government and women unfit, are on the affirmative side of the question, and are bound to show positive evidence for their position or accept that it has been defeated.

It is equally unavailing for me to say:

Those who deny to women any freedom or privilege that is rightly allowed to men are opposing freedom *and* recommending partiality, so there is a *double* presumption against them; and they should be held to the strictest standards of proof, with the judgment going against them unless they argue successfully enough to exclude all doubt.

These would be regarded as good pleas in any ordinary case—but not in this one! Before I could hope to make any impression ·on the other side· I would be expected not only to answer everything ever said by the opposition, but to imagine everything that *could* be said by them. . . . And besides refuting all arguments for the affirmative ·anti-liberty

pro-discrimination· side, I'll be called upon for invincible positive arguments to prove a negative. And even if I could leave the opposite party with a host of unanswered arguments against them, and not a single unrefuted argument on their side, this wouldn't be regarded as much of an achievement; because a cause supported by universal usage and by such a great weight of popular sentiment is supposed to have a presumption in its favour, superior to any conviction that an appeal to reason can produce in intellects other than those of a high class. [In Mill's day a 'sentiment' could be a feeling, or a belief, or a practical attitude. In this version the word will be left unaltered. Decide for yourself what he means by each occurrence of it.]

I am not *complaining* about these difficulties. It would be useless to do so, because they are inevitable when one has to argue through •people's understandings against the hostility of •their feelings and practical tendencies. I am up against

practical principles in which people have been born and bred, and which are the basis of much existing order of the world;

I can hardly expect them to

surrender at the first argumentative attack that they aren't capable of logically resisting.

That would require them to rely on their own power of estimating arguments, and *that* can't happen until the understandings of the majority of mankind are much better developed than they ever have been. So I am quarreling with my opponents not for having •too little faith in argument but for having •too much faith in custom and the general feeling.

### **Reason versus 'instinct'**

The eighteenth century is supposed to have regarded the reasoning elements in human nature as infallible; in reaction

against that, the nineteenth century attributes infallibility to the unreasoning elements. We have replaced the god-like status of Reason by a god-like status for Instinct; and we label as 'instinct' anything that we find in ourselves and can't find any rational foundation for. This idolatry is infinitely more degrading than the other; of all the false worships of the present day, this one is the worst and is the main support of all the others. It probably won't be dislodged until a sound psychology lays bare the real root of much that people now bow down to as 'intended by Nature' and 'commanded by God'. As regards the present question, I shall *accept*. . . that established custom and general feelings should be regarded as conclusive against me, unless this custom and feeling can be shown to have owed their existence down through the ages to causes other than their soundness, and to have derived their power from the worse rather than the better parts of human nature. Let the judgment go against me unless I can show that the judge in this case has been tampered with! This is a smaller concession than you might think, because proving this—i.e. proving that there's something bad and wrong about the causes of the feelings that oppose me—is by far the easiest part of my task.

If a practice is very general, this sometimes creates a strong presumption that it is—or at any rate *was*—conducive to praiseworthy ends. This is the case when the practice was first started (or later kept up) as a means to such ends, and was based on experience of how the ends could be most effectively be achieved. If the following were the case—

- When the authority of men over women was first established, that was the result of conscientiously comparing different ways of structuring the government of society;
- various other types of social organisation were tried—the government of women over men, equality between

the two, and other such mixed and divided structures of government; and

- people's experience of those convinced them that the best arrangement for producing the happiness and well-being of both women and men was the one in which women are wholly under the rule of men, having no share at all in public concerns, and each in private being legally obliged to obey the man with whom she has associated her destiny

—if *that* were the case (I repeat), that would provide some evidence that when the subjection of women was first adopted it *was* the best (though even then the social facts that recommended it may have since then ceased to be facts). But the state of the case is in every respect the reverse of this. **(1)** The opinion in favour of the present system. . . rests on theory only, for no other system has been *tried*; so that experience, as contrasted with theory, can't be claimed to have pronounced any verdict. **(2)** 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 would be best for humanity or the good order of society. It arose simply from the fact that **from the dawn of human society every woman was in a state of bondage to some man, because she was of value to him and she had less muscular strength than he did**. Laws and political systems always begin by recognising the relations they find already existing between individuals, converting a mere physical fact into a legal right, giving it the sanction of society; their main aim is to replace

the assertion and protection of these rights by irregular and lawless conflict of physical strength

by

the assertion and protection of these same rights by public and organised means.

In this way, those who had already been *compelled* to obey became *legally bound* to obey. Slavery, at first a mere affair of force between the master and the slave, came to be governed by rules, and to be a matter of agreement among the masters: binding themselves to one another for common protection, the masters guaranteed by their collective strength the private possessions of each, including his slaves. In early times, most males were slaves, as well as all females. And many centuries passed—some of them times of high cultivation—before any thinker was bold enough to ask ‘Is it right? Is it absolutely socially necessary?’ about either of these slaveries. Gradually such thinkers did arise; and. . .at last the slavery of the male sex has been abolished in all the countries of Christian Europe; and. . .the slavery of the female sex has been gradually changed into a milder form of dependence. But this dependence, as it exists at present, is not an original institution, taking a fresh start from considerations of justice and social expediency—it is the primitive state of slavery lasting on through a series of weakenings brought about by the same causes that have softened all kinds of conduct and brought all human relations more under the control of justice and the influence of humanity. The subjection of women hasn’t lost the taint of its brutal origin. So the mere fact of its existence doesn’t create any presumption in its favour. Anyone who wants there to be a presumption in its favour had better try to get it from the fact that the subjection of women has survived, while many products of the same odious source have been done away with. And *that* fact is what makes the statement ‘The inequality of rights between men and women has no other source than the law of the strongest’ sound strange to ordinary ears.

That this statement should sound like a paradox is in some respects creditable to the progress of civilisation and

the improvement of mankind’s moral sentiments [see note on page 2]. We now live—i.e. one or two of the world’s most advanced nations now live—in a state in which the law of the strongest seems to be entirely abandoned as the regulating principle of the world’s affairs: nobody proclaims it, and in most contexts nobody is permitted to practise it. When anyone succeeds in doing so, he disguises it through the pretence that he has some general social interest on his side. This being the apparent state of things, people flatter themselves that the rule of mere force is ended; that the law of the strongest can’t be the reason for the existence of anything that has remained in full operation down to the present time. They think: ‘However any of our present institutions may have •begun, no institution can have been •preserved into this period of advanced civilisation except by a well-grounded feeling that it fits human nature and is conducive to the general good.’ They don’t understand

- the great vitality and durability of institutions that place right on the side of might;
- how intensely they are clung to;
- how the good as well as the bad propensities and sentiments of those who have power in their hands become identified with retaining it;
- how slowly these bad institutions give way, one at a time, the weakest first. beginning with those that are least interwoven with the daily habits of life; and
- how very rarely those who have obtained legal power because they first had physical power have ever lost their hold of it until the physical power had passed over to the other side.

That shifting of the physical force didn’t happen in the case of women; and this fact, combined with all the special features of this particular case, made it certain from the outset that *this* branch of the system of *right founded on might* would be

the very last to disappear (though its most atrocious features were softened earlier than several of the others). . . . So it isn't surprising that the subjection of women, as long as it doesn't proclaim its own origin and there is no discussion bringing to light its true character, isn't felt to jar with modern civilisation, any more than domestic slavery among the Greeks jarred with their notion of themselves as a free people.

### **Modern changes of attitude**

The truth is that people of the present and the last two or three generations have lost all practical sense of the primitive condition of humanity. The only ones who can form any mental picture of what society was like in ancient times are the few who have •studied history or have •spent much time in parts of the world occupied by the living representatives of ages long past. People don't now realize how entirely, in former ages, the •law of superior strength was the •rule of life, and how publicly and openly it was proclaimed. (•Note the adverbs I have chosen•. I don't say 'cynically' or 'shamelessly', because those words imply a feeling that there was something in it to be ashamed of, and in those earlier ages only a philosopher or a saint could have room in his mind for any such notion.) History gives a cruel experience of human nature, in showing •that the regard due to the life, possessions, and entire earthly happiness of any category of people was measured precisely by what they had the power of enforcing; and •that all who in any way resisted authorities that had power, however dreadful might be the provocation, were opposed not only by the law of force but also by all other laws and all the notions of social duty; and were regarded by those whom they resisted as being guilty. . . .of the worst of all crimes, deserving the cruellest punishments

human beings could inflict. [A tiny change came about when masters found it convenient to make promises to their slaves, Mill says, but such promises were lightly regarded and not very effective. Then:] The ancient republics provided the first examples of a portion of human relations fenced around and governed by something other than the law of force; that is because they were from the outset based on some kind of agreement, or at any rate were created by a union of persons with about the same amount of power. The original •law of force remained in full operation between them and their slaves, and also (except when limited by explicit agreements) between a commonwealth and its subjects or other independent commonwealths; but still •its banishment even from such a narrow domain as that of relations among the powerful started the regeneration of human nature. It did this by giving birth to sentiments of which experience soon demonstrated the immense value, even for material interests, and which from then on only needed to be enlarged, not created. Although slaves were not part of the commonwealth, it was in the free states [Mill's phrase] that slaves were first felt to have rights as human beings. The Stoics were, I believe, the first—except so far as the Jewish law constitutes an exception—who taught as a part of morality that men had moral obligations to their slaves. After Christianity became ascendant, no-one could ever again have been a stranger to this belief, in theory; and after the rise of the Catholic Church there were always people who stood up for it. Yet enforcing it was the hardest task that Christianity ever had to perform. For more than a thousand years the Church kept up the contest, with hardly any perceptible success. It wasn't for lack of power over men's minds. The Church's power was prodigious. It could make kings and nobles hand over their most valued possessions to enrich the Church. It could make thousands of people. . . .shut themselves up in

convents to work out their salvation by poverty, fasting, and prayer. It could send hundreds of thousands across land and sea, Europe and Asia, to give their lives for the deliverance of the Holy Sepulchre [this is a reference to the Crusades]. . . . All this it did; but it couldn't make men fight less with one another, or be less cruel in their tyranny over the serfs and (when they could) over ordinary citizens. . . . Only by the growing power of *kings* was an end put to fighting (except between kings or competitors for kingship); only by the growth of a wealthy and warlike bourgeoisie in the fortified towns, and of a peasant infantry that proved more powerful in battle than undisciplined knights on horseback, were some limits set to the insolent tyranny of the nobles over the bourgeoisie and peasantry. •This tyranny was persisted in until long *after* the oppressed had acquired enough power to be able, often, to get conspicuous revenge; and on the Continent much of •it continued up to the time of the French Revolution, though in England the earlier and better organisation of the democratic classes put an end to it sooner, by establishing equal laws and free national institutions.

### Slavery and absolute monarchy

. . . . People mostly don't remember or bear in mind how institutions and customs that never had any basis but the law of force *last on* into ages and states of general opinion that would never have permitted them to be *established*. Less than forty years ago Englishmen could still by law hold human beings in bondage as saleable property; within the present century they could kidnap them and work them literally to death. This absolutely extreme case of the law of force, condemned *even* by those who can tolerate almost every other form of arbitrary power. . . . was the law of civilised and Christian England within the memory of persons now

living; and in one half of Anglo-Saxon America, three or four years ago, not only did slavery exist but the slave-trade and the breeding of slaves expressly for that trade was a general practice between slave states. Yet not only was there more sentiment [see note on page 2] against it but (in England at least) less feeling or interest in favour of it than of any other of the customary abuses of force; because the motive for it was nakedly commercial, those who profited by it were a very small minority, and the natural feeling of all those who weren't personally getting anything from it was absolute loathing. . . . Then consider the long duration of absolute monarchy, *i.e.* monarchy with no legal controls or limits on how the monarch can behave or what laws he can pass. [Mill in his next sentence equates that with 'military despotism', presumably on the grounds that no monarch could have absolute powers if he didn't have control of the country's army.] In England at present almost everyone sees military despotism as a case of *the law of force*, having no origin or justification but that. Yet in all the other great nations of Europe it still exists, or ceased to exist only recently; and even now it is favoured by many people, especially but not exclusively by people with high social status and importance. [Mill's point here, he explains, is that absolute monarchy has proved to be remarkably durable despite two features that might be expected to weaken it:

- (1) Plenty of countries don't have it. And at most times in history there have been spectacularly prosperous and successful countries that were governed in other ways.
- (2) The immediate beneficiary of an absolute monarchy is the monarch, that one person; for everyone else this system is 'naturally and necessarily humiliating'.

In contrast with this, the system of the subjection of women

- (1) is universal; there are no vivid examples of prosperous rejections of it; and



(2) is immediately gratifying to half of the human race, namely the male half: 'The clodhopper exercises. . . his share of the power equally with the highest nobleman'.

And it has a third feature that favours its survival over absolute monarchy, namely:

(3) Anyone who is empowered by the subjection of women gets power over the person who is closest to him, and. . . ]

. . . everyone who desires power desires it most over those who are nearest to him, with whom his life is passed, with whom he has most concerns in common and in whom any independence of his authority is oftenest likely to interfere with his individual preferences. . . . Also, the possessors of the power provided by the subjection of women are better placed than any absolute monarch to prevent any uprising against the system. Every one of the *subjects* lives under the very eye. . . of one of the *masters*, in closer intimacy with him than with any of her fellow-subjects; with no means of combining against him, no power of even locally overmastering him; and with the strongest motives for seeking his favour and avoiding giving him offence. In struggles for political emancipation, we all know how often its champions are bought off by bribes, or daunted by terrors. In the case of women, each individual of the subject-class is in a permanent state of bribery and intimidation combined. . . . If ever any system of privilege and enforced subjection had its yoke tightly riveted on the necks of those who are kept down by it, this has. I haven't yet shown that it is a wrong system: but anyone who can *think* about this must see that even if it is wrong it was certain to outlast all other forms of unjust authority. And when some of the grossest of the other forms still exist in many civilised countries, and have only recently been got rid of in others, it would be strange if

the one that is most deeply rooted had yet been perceptibly shaken anywhere. . . .

### Natural?

Some will object that it's not fair to compare •the government of the male sex with •the other forms of unjust power that I have discussed, because *it* is natural while the others are arbitrary and brought about by mere usurpation. But was there ever any domination that didn't appear natural to those who possessed it? There was a time when the division of mankind into a small class of masters and a large class of slaves appeared, even to the most cultivated minds, to be the only natural condition of the human race! Aristotle, with his great intellect and his great contributions to the progress of human thought, held this opinion without doubt or misgiving; and his reason for it was the reason usually given for the dominion of men over women, namely that there are different natures among mankind, free natures and slave natures; that the Greeks were of a free nature, the barbarian races of Thracians and Asiatics of a slave nature. [And, Mill continues, the same was said by the slave-owners of the southern United States.] Again, the theorists of absolute monarchy have always claimed it to be the only natural form of government, descending ultimately from the authority of a father over his family, . . . which is older and more basic than society itself and, they contend, the most natural authority of all. Indeed the law of force itself has always seemed the most natural of all grounds for the exercise of authority—has seemed so, I mean, to those who haven't been able to find any other basis •for their favoured form of tyranny•. Conquering races hold it to be Nature's own dictate that the feebler and more unwarlike races should submit to the braver and more manly, or, to put it more bluntly, that the conquered

should obey the conquerors. The smallest acquaintance with human life in the middle ages shows •how *supremely natural* the dominion of the feudal nobility over men of low condition appeared to the nobility themselves, and •how unnatural the conception seemed, of a person of the inferior class claiming equality with them or exercising authority over them. And it seemed almost as natural to the class held in subjection: the emancipated serfs and citizenry, even in their most vigorous struggles, never claimed a share of authority; they only demanded some limitation to the power of tyrannising over them. So true is it that 'unnatural' generally means only 'uncustomary', and that whatever is usual appears natural. The subjection of women to men is a universal custom, so any departure from it quite naturally appears unnatural! . . . When people in distant parts of the world first learn anything about England, they are astonished to be told that England is under a queen; that seems to them so unnatural as to be almost incredible. To Englishmen it doesn't seem at all unnatural, because they are used to it; but they *do* feel it unnatural that women should be soldiers or members of parliament. In the feudal ages, on the other hand, war and politics were not thought unnatural to women, because they were not unusual; it seemed natural that women of the privileged classes should be of manly character, inferior in nothing but bodily strength to their husbands and fathers. The independence of women seemed rather less unnatural to the Greeks than to other peoples in ancient times, because of the mythical Amazons (whom they believed to be historical), and the partial example of the women of Sparta, who, though they were •by law just as subordinate to men as the women in other Greek states, were more free •in fact; they were trained to bodily exercises in the same way as the men, giving ample proof that they were not naturally disqualified for them. There can be little doubt that Spartan experience

suggested to Plato, among many other of his doctrines, that of the social and political equality of the two sexes.

### Complaints

It will be said that •the rule of men over women differs from all these others in *not* being a rule a rule of force, •that it is accepted voluntarily, •that women don't complain, and are consenting parties to it. Well, the first point to make is that a great number of women do *not* accept it. Ever since there have been women able to make their sentiments known by their writings (the only form of going-public that society permits to them), increasingly many of them have protested against their present social condition; and recently many thousands of them, headed by the most eminent women known to the public, petitioned Parliament to allow them the vote. The claim of women to be educated as well and as broadly as men as men is urged with growing intensity and with a great prospect of success; while the demand for their admission into professions and occupations that have so far been closed to them becomes more urgent every year. [Mill speaks of movements along these lines in the USA and in some European countries. Then:] We can't possibly know how many more women there are who silently have such hopes, but there are plenty of signs of how many *would* have them if they weren't so strenuously taught to repress them as improper for their sex. •It may have occurred to you that these examples concern only certain parts or aspects of the subjection of women, not the whole thing. Nothing much follows from that, however. •No enslaved class ever asked for complete liberty at once. [The next sentence refers to a 13th-century rebel who during his brief time of power established a parliament that included representatives of the common people.] When Simon de Montfort called the representatives of the common people to

sit for the first time in Parliament, did any of them dream of demanding that such an assembly. . . . should make and destroy ministries, and dictate to the king in affairs of State? No such thought entered into the imagination of the most ambitious of them. The nobility were already claiming such powers; the common people claimed only to be exempt from arbitrary taxation and from the gross individual oppression of the king's officers. It is a political law of nature that **those who are subjected to any power of very long standing never begin by complaining of the power itself, but only of the oppressive use of it.** There's never any shortage of women who complain of ill-usage by their husbands. There would be infinitely more if complaints weren't apt to provoke the husbands to repeat and increase the ill-usage. That is what frustrates all attempts to •maintain the power but •protect the woman against its abuses. In no other case (except that of a child) is a person who has been proved judicially to have suffered an injury put back into the physical power of the culprit who inflicted it! That is why wives, even in the most extreme and long-drawn-out cases of bodily ill-usage, hardly ever dare make use of the laws that have been made for their protection; and if a woman is induced to do so—in a moment of irrepressible indignation, or through the interference of neighbours—all she does from there on is to reveal as little as possible and to beg off her tyrant from the punishment he deserves.

### **Affection**

. . . . Women are in a different position from all other subject classes in this: their masters require more from them than actual service. Men want not only the obedience of women but also their sentiments [see note on page 2]. All but the most brutish of men want 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. So they have done everything they could to enslave women's minds. The masters of all other slaves get obedience through fear, either of themselves or of some religious punishment. The masters of women wanted more than simple obedience, and they turned the whole force of education to get what they wanted. All women are brought up from their earliest years to believe that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men: not self-will and government by self-control, but submission and accepting control by someone else. All the moralities tell them that it is their *duty*, and all the current ideas about feelings tell them that it is their *nature*, to live for others—to set aside their own wishes and interests and have no life but in their affections. And by 'their affections' are meant the only ones they are allowed to have—those to the men with whom they are connected, or to the children who constitute an additional and unbreakable tie between them and a man. When we put together these three things—

- (1) the natural attraction between opposite sexes;
- (2) the wife's entire dependence on the husband, with every privilege or pleasure that she has being either his gift or depending entirely on his will;
- (3) the fact that it is only through the man that the woman can seek or obtain the principal object of human pursuit, namely consideration, or any objects of social ambition;

—it would be a miracle if the objective of *being attractive to men* had not become the polar star of feminine education and formation of character. And once men had acquired this great means of influence over the minds of women, an instinct of selfishness made them avail themselves of it to the utmost as a means of keeping women in subjection, by telling them that an essential part of sexual attractiveness

is meekness, submissiveness, and delivering all individual will into the hands of a man. [Mill goes on to say that if this kind of oppression-through-feelings had been built into other systems of servitude, they would have lasted longer, and would now be regarded as being just as 'natural' as the subjection of women, and would be challenged only by 'a thinker here and there'.]

### **The course of history**

What I have said up to here is quite enough to show that *custom*, however universal it may be, doesn't create any presumption. . . .in favour of the arrangements that put women in social and political subjection to men. But I go further, and maintain that the course of history and the tendencies of progressive human society create a strong presumption *against* this system of inequality of rights; and that if we can infer anything from the whole course of human improvement up to now—the whole stream of modern tendencies—it is that this relic of the past is out of tune with the future and must necessarily disappear.

What is the special character of the modern world—the difference that chiefly distinguishes modern institutions, modern social ideas, modern life itself, from those of times long past? It is that human beings are no longer born to their place in life, and chained down by an unbreakable bond to the place they are born to, but are free to use their talents and any good luck that comes their way to have the kind of life that they find most desirable. Human society was for ages constituted on a very different principle. All were born to a fixed social position, and were mostly kept in it by law or debarred from any means by which they could emerge from it. As some men are born white and others black, so some were born slaves and others freemen and citizens;

some were born patricians, others plebeians; some were born feudal nobles, others commoners and serfs. A slave or serf could never make himself free; his only route to freedom was through the will of his master. [Mill continues with this theme: the centuries through which commoners couldn't become nobles; a noble father couldn't disinherit his eldest son; a worker couldn't be a shoemaker or tailor or carpenter or the like unless he was born into the guild controlling that trade or was admitted into the guild by its members; every activity regarded as important had to be conducted according to officially dictated rules; manufacturers were punished for introducing new and improved methods for their business. Then:] In modern Europe, especially in the parts of it that have gone furthest in all other modern improvements, diametrically opposite doctrines now prevail. Law and government don't prescribe who can and who can't conduct any social or industrial operation, or what procedures for conducting them shall be lawful. These things are left to the free choice of individuals. Even the laws requiring workmen to serve an apprenticeship have been repealed in England, on the grounds that wherever an apprenticeship is necessary its necessity will force it to happen. The old theory was that as little as possible should be left to the choice of the individual, and that as far as was practicable his conduct should be laid down for him by superior wisdom. Left to himself he was sure to go wrong. The modern conviction, based on a thousand years of experience, is that things that directly involve a person's interests never go right except when they are left to his own discretion; and that any regulation of them by authority, except to protect the rights of others, is sure to do harm. This conclusion was slowly arrived at, and not adopted until almost every possible application of the contrary theory had been made with disastrous result; but now the part of it that

concerns *work* prevails in all the most advanced countries and in most of the others that have any claim to any sort of advancement. The thesis is not:

All processes are equally good, and all persons are equally qualified for every task or trade;

but rather:

Freedom of individual choice is the only thing that leads to the adoption of the best processes, and puts each operation into the hands of those who are best qualified for it.

Nobody thinks it necessary to make a law that only a strong-armed man shall be a blacksmith. Freedom and competition suffice to make blacksmiths strong-armed men, because others can earn more in occupations for which they are more fit. In line with this doctrine, it is felt to be improper to adopt a general presumption that certain classes of persons are not fit to do certain things. Everyone now knows and admits that if some such presumptions do exist, none of them are infallible. Even if a presumption is well grounded in a majority of cases (which it probably isn't!), there will be a minority of exceptional cases where it doesn't hold: and in those cases it is unjust to the individuals and harmful to society to put barriers in the way of their using their abilities for the benefit of themselves and others. And in the cases where the unfitness is real, the ordinary motives of human conduct will usually suffice to prevent the incompetent person from making or from persisting in the attempt.

If this general principle of social and economic science is not true—if individuals, perhaps with help from the opinion of those who know them, aren't better judges of their own capacities and vocation than the government is—then the world should immediately abandon this principle and return to the old system of regulations and disabilities. But if the

principle is true, we ought to act as if we believed it. We *do* accept that someone's being

born black instead of white, or

born a commoner instead of a nobleman,

shouldn't fix his position throughout life, barring him from all the more elevated social positions and from nearly all respectable occupations. Well, we should accept the same thing regarding someone's being

born a girl instead of a boy.

Let us apply this to the legal requirement that a Member of Parliament must be a man. Even if we accept the strongest claims that are ever made about the superior fitness of men for this role, the legal requirement is still wrong. If it happens only once in a dozen years that this law excludes a woman who is fit to be an M.P., that exclusion is a real loss to society, whereas the exclusion of thousands of unfit persons is no gain. If the electors are disposed to choose unfit persons as M.P.s, there are always plenty of those to choose from! For any difficult and important job, there is always a need for more people who could do it well than are actually available, even with the most unrestricted field of choice: and any limitation of the field of selection deprives society of some chances of being served by the competent, without ever saving it from the incompetent.

At present, in the more improved countries, the disabilities of women are the only case but one in which laws and institutions take persons at their birth and ordain that they shall never in all their lives be allowed to compete for certain things. The one exception is that of royalty. [Mill says that the status of royalty, as something one has to be born into, is felt by everyone to be an exception; the case for it appeals to customs and traditions, which are given different weights in different countries; and he emphasizes that in the modern

world monarchs don't really *do* anything significant: what is ostensibly the work of the monarch is done by the prime minister, who isn't qualified for his role by birth, though he would have been disqualified for it if he were female. Mill sums up:] So the disabilities to which women are subject from the mere fact of their birth are the only examples of the kind in modern legislation. In no instance except this, which takes in half the human race, are the higher social functions closed against anyone by the sheer fact of birth which no exertions, and no change of circumstances, can overcome. . . . [Mill uses the phrase 'the higher social functions' to refer to political office (e.g. being a Member of Parliament), high positions in the civil service, and so on. The word 'function' occurs very often in chapter 3, and will be left unaltered there.]

The social subordination of women thus stands out as an isolated fact in modern social institutions—a solitary infringement of what has become their fundamental law, a single relic of an old world of thought and practice. . . . This entire discrepancy between one social fact and all the others that accompany it, and the radical opposition between its nature and the progressive movement that is the boast of the modern world. . . ., provides something to be thought about seriously by any conscientious observer of human tendencies. It raises a *prima facie* presumption on the unfavourable side, far outweighing any presumption that custom and usage could create on the favourable side. It should be enough, at least, make this an issue with two sides to it—like the issue between republicanism and royalty.

[Mill goes on to demand a real and fair discussion of the issue over the subjection of women. He warns against invalid appeals to experience. 'Experience can't possibly have decided between two courses of action when there has been experience of only one.' But experience can tell us something relevant:] Experience does say that every step

in social improvement has been accompanied by a step made in raising the social position of women; and this has happened so invariably that historians and philosophers have been led to *measure* •the civilisation of a people or an age by •the status that it give to women. . . . This does not of itself prove that the assimilation must go on to complete equality; but it surely creates some presumption that such is the case.

### The 'nature' of women

And it's no use saying that the nature of the two sexes fits them for their present functions and positions. . . . Standing on the ground of common sense and the constitution of the human mind, I deny that anyone can know the nature of the two sexes, as long as they have only been seen in their present relation to one another. . . . What is now called 'the nature of women' is an artificial thing—the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others. . . . A hot-house and stove cultivation has always been provided for some of women's capabilities, for the benefit and pleasure of their masters. These sprout luxuriantly in this heated atmosphere and with active cultivation and watering; while other shoots from the same root, left outside in the wintry air with ice purposely heaped all around them, have a stunted growth, and some are burnt off with fire and disappear; and men—with that inability to recognise their own work that distinguishes the unanalytic mind—lazily believe that the tree grows •of itself in the way •they have made it grow, and that it would die if one half of it weren't kept in a vapour bath and the other half in the snow.

What is now the biggest obstacle to the progress of thought and the forming of well-grounded opinions about life and social arrangements is mankind's *unspeakable*

inattention to the influences that form human character. . . .

- Because a peasant deeply in arrears to his landlord is not industrious, some people think that the Irish are naturally idle.
- Because constitutions can be overthrown when the authorities appointed to serve them turn their arms against them, some people think the French incapable of free government.
- Because the Greeks •cheated the Turks whereas the Turks only •plundered the Greeks, some people think that the Turks are naturally more sincere.
- Because women (they say) don't care about politics except for an interest in politicians, the general good is thought to be naturally less interesting to them than to men.

History, which is now so much better understood than it used to be, teaches another lesson, if only by showing how enormously open human nature is to external influences, and how variable are human characteristics that are supposed to be most universal and uniform. But in history, as in travelling, men usually see only what they already had in their own minds. . . .

*What are the natural differences between the two sexes?*

In the present state of society we can't get a complete and correct answer to this; yet almost everybody dogmatizes about it, hardly anyone attends seriously to the only source for even a partial answer. The source I'm referring to is an analytic study of the most important topic in psychology, namely **the laws governing the influence of circumstances on character**. Why the emphasis on laws? Because however great and apparently ineradicable the moral and intellectual differences between men and women might be, the only evidence we can have for there being *natural* differences is negative: inferring that a given

difference •is natural from evidence that it •can't possibly be artificial. Natural differences will be what is left behind after setting aside every characteristic of either sex that can be explained through external circumstances. To be entitled to affirm that there is *any* difference between the two sexes considered as moral and rational beings—let alone to say what the difference is—one must have the profoundest knowledge of the laws of the formation of character; and since no-one yet has that knowledge no-one is yet entitled to any positive opinion about this topic. Regarding the lack of that knowledge: there is hardly any subject which, in proportion to its importance, has been so little studied! . . .

Indeed we have only rough and incomplete knowledge of what the differences between the sexes now are, never mind how they came to be that way. Medical practitioners and physiologists have discovered some of the differences in bodily constitution. . . .but they have no special qualifications for learning about the mental characteristics of women. *That* is a subject on which nothing final can be known, so long as the only people who can really know it—women themselves—have little to say about it and the little that they do say is mostly suborned, •by which I mean that women are usually under pressure not to tell the truth about their own mental abilities. It is easy to know stupid women: stupidity is much the same all the world over; a stupid person's notions and feelings will be simply the ones that are prevalent in the social circles he or she moves in. It's a different story with people whose opinions and feelings come from their own individual nature and faculties. It's a rare man who has any significant knowledge of the character even of the women of his own family. I don't mean knowledge of •their capabilities (nobody knows what those are, not even women themselves, because most of their abilities have never been called upon); I'm talking about •their actual

thoughts and feelings. Many a man thinks he perfectly understands women because he has had romantic relations with several of them, perhaps with many of them. If he is a good observer and his experience has been of the right kind, he may have learned something about one narrow part of women's nature—an important part, no doubt, but then there is all the rest. . . . In general a man's best chance of studying the character of a woman is by attending to his own wife. . . .and this is in fact the source from which any knowledge worth having on the subject has generally come. But most men have had the opportunity of studying only one woman in this way, so that usually one can infer what a man's wife is like from his opinions about women in general! To make even this one case yield any result, it has to be the case that

- the woman is worth knowing,
- the man is a competent judge, and
- the man can. . . .read her mind by sympathetic intuition or has nothing in his character that makes her shy of disclosing it.

This, I believe, is an extremely rare conjunction. It often happens that a husband and wife have complete unity of feeling and community of interests with respect to all external things, yet neither has any more admission into the internal life of the other than if they were mere acquaintances. Even when there is true affection, authority on the one side and subordination on the other prevent perfect confidence. Though nothing may be intentionally withheld, much is not shown. [Mill likens this to relations between a father and a son: even when there is real affection on both sides, there's a lot about a son's character that his father doesn't know. Mill takes this to illustrate the general thesis that] for two people to know one another thoroughly, they need to be not only intimates but equals. How much more true this

must be when one of the two is not only under the other's authority but has had it drummed into her that it's her duty to subordinate everything to his comfort and pleasure, and to speak and act only in ways that are agreeable to him! These are obstacles to a man's getting thorough knowledge of the only woman he has sufficient opportunity of studying. Add to this the fact that to understand one woman is not necessarily to understand any other woman; that even if a man studies many women of one social level or of one country, that won't enable him to understand women at other levels or in other countries; and even if he did *that*, those are still only the women of a single period of history. It is safe to say that the knowledge men can acquire of women, even as they have been and are—never mind what they could be—is wretchedly incomplete and superficial, and that it always will be so until women themselves have told all that they have to tell.

And this time has not come, and if it does come it will do so gradually. Only very recently have women been qualified by literary accomplishments and permitted by society to tell the general public anything. And very few of those have dared to tell anything that men, on whom their literary success depends, are unwilling to hear. If you remember how even a male author's expression of uncustomary opinions or what were regarded as eccentric feelings used to be (and sometimes still is) received, you'll get some faint conception of how hard it is for a woman, having been brought up to think custom and opinion her sovereign rule, to express in books anything drawn from the depths of her own nature. The greatest woman who has left writings behind her sufficient to give her an eminent rank in the literature of her country thought it necessary to prefix this motto to her boldest work *Un homme peut braver l'opinion; une femme doit s'y soumettre*—A man can openly defy public opinion; a woman



has to submit to it.<sup>1</sup> Most of what women write about women is mere sycophancy to men. In the case of unmarried women, much of it seems only intended to increase their chance of getting a husband. . . . Literary women are becoming more free-spoken, and more willing to express their real sentiments. Unfortunately, in this country especially, they are *themselves* such artificial products that their sentiments are made up of a small dose of individual observation and consciousness and a very large one of acquired associations. This will be less and less the case, but it will remain true to a great extent as long as social institutions don't allow to women the same free development of originality that is possible for men. When that time comes, and not before, we shall see, and not merely hear, as much as it is necessary to know of the nature of women, and the adaptation of other things to it. [That last sentence is exactly as Mill wrote it. You might care to think about what he was getting at when he wrote '... see, and not merely hear. . . .']

I have dwelt so much on the present obstacles to men's knowing the true nature of women because in this as in so many other things *opinio copiae inter maximas causas inopiae est*, .i.e. one of the great causes of ignorance is believing that one knows a lot; and there's not much chance of reasonable thinking on this topic while people flatter themselves that they perfectly understand a subject of which most men know absolutely nothing. Among other things, it is at present impossible for any man, or all men taken together, to have knowledge that would qualify them to dictate to women what is their vocation and what isn't. Fortunately, no such knowledge is required for any practical purpose connected with women's relation to society and to life, because. . . .that question rests with women themselves—to be decided by

their experience and the use of their faculties. . . .

One thing we can be certain of—that if something is contrary to women's nature you won't get them to do it by giving their nature free play! There is no reason whatsoever for mankind to interfere on nature's behalf for fear that nature won't succeed in carrying out its purpose. . . . If there's something they can do but not as well as the men who are their competitors, competition will exclude them from it; because what is being asked for is not protective duties and tariffs in favour of women, but only that the present tariffs and protective duties in favour of men should be recalled. If women have a greater natural inclination for x than for y, there's no need for laws or social indoctrination to make most of them do x in preference to y. Whatever women's services are most wanted for, the free play of competition will hold out the strongest inducements to them to undertake. . . .

### The 'need' for compulsion

The general opinion of men is supposed to be that a woman's natural vocation is that of a wife and mother. I say 'is *supposed to be*' because judging from the present constitution of society one might think that their opinion was the exact opposite. Perhaps this is what they think:

The natural vocation of women is of all things the most in conflict with their nature: if. . . .any other job or pastime is open to them that has any chance of appearing desirable to them, there won't be enough of them who will be willing 'to be wives and mothers', .i.e. to accept the condition that is said to be natural to them.

If this really is what men in general believe, they should say so out loud. I would like to hear somebody openly expressing

<sup>1</sup> From the title-page of *Delphine*, a novel by Madame de Staël, a French romantic writer who died in 1817.

the doctrine (it is already implied in much that is written on the subject):

‘Society needs women to marry and produce children. They won’t do so unless they are compelled. Therefore it is necessary to compel them.’

The merits of the case would then be clearly defined. It would be exactly the same as the case of the slave-holders of South Carolina and Louisiana:

‘It is necessary that cotton and sugar should be grown. White men cannot produce them. Negroes will not, for any wages that we choose to give. Therefore, they must be compelled.’

An example closer to home is that of impressment:

‘Sailors absolutely must be had to defend the country. It often happens that they won’t voluntarily enlist. Therefore there must be the power of forcing them.’

[That is how the British navy used to acquire sailors: official ‘press gangs’ would kidnap men and force them into the service of the navy. The laws permitting this were still on the books in Mill’s time, though the practice had died out.] How often has this logic been used! and it would have been successful up to this day if it didn’t have one flaw, namely being open to the response:

‘First pay the sailors the honest value of their labour. When you have made it as well worth their while to serve you as to work for other employers, you’ll have no more difficulty than anyone else in obtaining their services.’

The only logical answer to this is ‘I will not’; and impressment is no longer defended, because people now don’t want to rob the labourer of his wages—don’t want to, and are ashamed

to. Those who try to force women into marriage by closing all other doors against them are open to a similar response. If they mean what they say, they must believe that men don’t make the married condition attractive enough to women to induce them to accept it for its own sake. . . . And here, I believe, is the clue to the feelings of men who really dislike the idea of equal freedom for women: the outcome they are afraid of isn’t women •being unwilling to marry (I don’t think anyone really has that fear), but women •insisting that marriage be on equal conditions. They are afraid that all women of spirit and capacity might prefer •doing almost anything else that they don’t regard as degrading to •marrying, when by marrying they’ll be providing themselves with a master—of themselves and of all their earthly possessions. And indeed if marriage *had* to be like that, their fears would be very well founded. I agree with them that few women who are capable of anything else would, voluntarily and knowing what they were doing, choose such a fate as that kind of marriage if they had any other way of filling a conventionally honourable place in life. If men are determined to have a despotic law of marriage, they are quite right—as a matter of mere policy—to leave women no choice about it. But in that case, everything that has been done in the modern world to loosen the chain on the minds of women has been a mistake. They never should have been allowed to become literate: women who read, and even more women who write, are as things now stand a contradiction and a disturbing element: and it was wrong to bring women up with any skills except those of a sex-slave or of a domestic servant.

## CHAPTER 2

### The laws governing marriage

Let us consider. . . the conditions that the laws of this and all other countries annex to the marriage contract. Given that marriage is •the destination assigned to women by society, •the prospect they are brought up to, and •the objective they are intended to pursue (except for those who aren't attractive enough to be chosen by any man as his companion), one might have expected that everything possible would have been done to make this condition one that they would *like* enough to have no cause for regret that they were denied the option of any other. Society has moved to a fairer approach in some of the relevant matters—e.g. slavery and service in the navy—but in this one matter of marriage laws society has persisted right up to today in getting what it wants by foul means rather than fair. The means used today are not *as* bad as they used to be. Originally women were taken by force, or regularly sold by their father to the husband. Until fairly recently the father could dispose of his daughter in marriage at his own will and pleasure, without any regard to hers. The Church was faithful to a better morality in that it required a formal 'yes' from the woman at the marriage ceremony; but there was nothing to show that the consent was freely given, and it was practically impossible for the girl to refuse if the father persisted, except perhaps when she could get the protection of religion by becoming a nun. [Before Christianity, Mill says, a husband had the power of life and death over his wife; and for many years in England things weren't much better. For example. a woman who killed her husband was guilty of 'treason' and was burned to death. Then:] Because these atrocities have fallen into disuse (for most of them were formally abolished, if at all, only after

they had long ceased to be practised), men suppose that all is now as it should be in regard to the marriage contract; and we are continually told that civilisation and Christianity have restored to the woman her just rights. And yet the wife is the actual bond servant of her husband: so far as the law is concerned, she is as subordinate to him as *slaves*, commonly so called, are to their masters. She promises life-long obedience to him at the altar, and is legally held to that all through her life. . . . She can do no act whatever without his at least tacit permission. She can acquire no property for herself: the instant something becomes hers, even if by inheritance, it automatically becomes 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. [Mill gives examples. He goes on to report the legal devices whereby fathers in 'the higher classes in this country' try to protect their daughters' property from their husbands, and comments on how little protection can be achieved even by 'the most powerful nobleman'. Then:] The two are called 'one person in law,' for the purpose of inferring that whatever is hers is his, but the parallel inference is never drawn that whatever is his is hers; the maxim is not applied against the man, except to make him responsible to third parties for her acts, as a master is for the acts of his slaves or of his cattle. I'm not claiming that wives are in general no better treated than slaves; but no slave is a *slave* to the same extent and in a full a sense of the word as a wife is. Hardly any slave. . . is a slave at all hours and all minutes; in general he has his fixed task, and when it is done he disposes up to a point of his own time and has

a family life into which the master rarely intrudes. 'Uncle Tom' under his first master had his own life in his 'cabin', almost as much as any man whose work takes him away from home is able to have in his own family. But it can't be so with the wife. Above all, in Christian countries a female slave has an admitted right—and is thought to have a moral obligation—to refuse to her master the last familiarity [Mill's phrase, referring to sexual intercourse]. Not so the wife: however brutal a tyrant her husbandslave is—even if she knows that he hates her, and/or it is his daily pleasure to torture her, and/or she finds it impossible not to loathe him—he can claim from her and ·legally· enforce the lowest degradation of a human being, that of being made the instrument of an animal function contrary to her inclinations. . . . What is her position in regard to the children in whom she and her master have a joint interest? They are by law his children. He alone has any legal rights over them. She can't do *anything* for them or in relation to them except what he has instructed or allowed her to do. Even after he is dead she isn't their legal guardian, unless his will has made her so. . . . This is her legal condition, and she has no means of getting out of it. If she leaves her husband, she can't take anything with her—not her children or anything that is rightfully her own. The husband can if he chooses compel her to return, by law or by physical force; or he may settle for merely seizing for his own use anything that she may earn or be given by her relatives. It is only legal separation ordered by a court of justice that •entitles her to live apart, without being forced back into the custody of an angry jailer, and •enables her to spend her earnings in her own way, without fear that a man whom perhaps she hasn't seen for twenty years will pounce on her some day and carry all off. [Such legal separation, Mill says, was until recently too expensive for most people; and it is still granted only in cases of desertion or of extreme

cruelty.] And yet people complain that legal separation is granted too easily! Surely, if a woman is denied any prospect for her life except that of being the personal body-servant of a despot, and must stake everything on the chance of finding one who will make a •favourite of her instead of merely a •drudge, to allow her to try this chance only once is a very cruel worsening of her fate. The natural upshot of the state of affairs I have described things would be that since everything in the woman's life depends on her obtaining a good master, she should be allowed to change again and again until she finds one. I'm not saying that she ought to be allowed this privilege. That is a totally different consideration: my present purposes don't require me to get into the question of 'divorce' in the sense in which this involves liberty of remarriage. All I'm saying here is that to those to whom nothing but servitude is allowed, the only lightening of the burden (and a most insufficient one at that) is to allow a free choice of servitude. Refusing *this* completes the assimilation of the wife to the slave—and not even the slave under the mildest form of slavery, for in some slave codes the slave could, under certain circumstances of ill usage, legally compel the master to sell him. But no amount of ill usage, without adultery thrown into the mix, will in England free a wife from her tormentor.

### Judging by the best instances

I don't want to exaggerate—and I don't need to! I have been describing the wife's legal position, not her actual treatment. The laws of most countries are far worse than the people who carry them out, and many of them couldn't remain laws if they were often enforced. If married life were just what might be expected from looking at the laws governing it, society would be a hell on earth. Fortunately, there

are feelings and interests that in many men •exclude (and in most of the others at least •mitigate) the impulses and propensities that lead to tyranny. In a normal state of things, the tie that connects a man with his wife provides by far the strongest example of such feelings. The only thing that comes anywhere near it is the tie between a man and his children, and this nearly always tends to strengthen the other tie. Because this is true—because men in general don't inflict (and women don't suffer) all the misery that could be inflicted (and suffered) if men used the full power of tyranny that the laws allow them—the defenders of the existing form of the institution ·of marriage· think that all its wickedness is justified, and that those who complain are merely quarrelling with the evil that is the price paid for every great good. But the loosening in •practice—which are compatible with maintaining in full •legal force the marriage tyranny—don't serve as any kind of excuse for this despotism (and all of this goes for *any* kind of tyranny). The loosening only serve to show human nature's power to react against the vilest institutions, and to show how energetically the seeds of good as well as those of evil in human character spread and propagate themselves. Not a word can be said for despotism in the family that can't be said for political despotism. Not every absolute king sits at his window to enjoy the groans of his tortured subjects, or strips them of their last rag and turns them out to shiver in the road. The despotism of Louis XVI was not as bad as those of some others [Mill cites three, including Caligula], but it was bad enough to justify the French Revolution and to palliate [= 'somewhat excuse'] even its horrors. What about the intense attachments that ·sometimes· exist between wives and their husbands? They have also existed ·sometimes· in domestic slavery. It wasn't unusual in Greece and Rome for slaves to submit to death by torture rather than betray their masters. . . . In fact

these intense individual feelings rise to their greatest height under the most atrocious institutions. It's part of the irony of life that human beings have their strongest feelings of devoted gratitude towards those who voluntarily refrain from using their power entirely to crush their earthly existence! How big a place does this sentiment have in the minds of most men, even in their religious devotion? That is a cruel question, ·and I shan't answer it here; but· we daily see how much people's gratitude to God appears to be stimulated by the thought of fellow-creatures to whom he has been less merciful.

When we are thinking about slavery, or political absolutism, or the absolutism of the head of a family, we are always expected to judge it by its best instances; and we are shown pictures of loving exercise of authority on one side, loving submission to it on the other—superior wisdom ordering all things for the greatest good of the dependents, and surrounded by their smiles and benedictions. All this is simply irrelevant. . . . Who doubts that there may be great goodness, happiness, and affection under the absolute government of a good man? But laws and institutions should be adapted not to good men but to bad. Marriage is not an institution designed for a select few. Men are not required, as a preliminary to the marriage ceremony, to prove by testimonials that they are fit to be trusted with the exercise of absolute power. The tie of affection and obligation to a wife and children is very strong in men whose general social feelings are strong, and in many who don't have much sense of any other social ties. But a man's social feelings can come anywhere on a long *scale* of degrees of intensity, right down to the level of men who aren't bound by any ties and on whom society has no grip except through the threat of legal punishment. At every level on this descending scale there are men who are given all the legal powers of a husband.

The vilest malefactor has tied to him some wretched woman against whom he can commit any atrocity except killing her—and with a little care he can do even *that* without much danger of the legal penalty. Among the lowest classes in every country, there are thousands of men who fit this description:

He is not in a legal sense a malefactor in any other way, because everywhere except in his marriage his aggressions meet with resistance. So the physical violence that is habitual in him is exercised on his unhappy wife, who is the only adult person who can't block his brutality or escape from it. Her dependence on him doesn't fill him with a generous forbearance, making it a point of honour to behave well to one whose life situation is entrusted entirely to his kindness; rather, it gives him the notion that the law has handed her over to him as *his*, to be used at his pleasure, and that he isn't expected to practise the consideration towards her that is required from him towards everybody else.

Until recently the law left even these atrocious extremes of domestic oppression practically unpunished; within the past few years it has made some feeble attempts to repress them. But these attempts haven't achieved much, and can't be expected to do so, because it is contrary to reason and experience to suppose that there can be any real barrier to brutality when the victim is left still in the power of the executioner. Until a conviction for personal violence (or at least for a second offence) automatically entitles the woman to a divorce or at least to a judicial separation, the use of legal penalties to repress these 'aggravated assaults' will fail for lack of a prosecutor or for lack of a witness.

When we consider how many men are little higher than brutes, and that this never prevents them from being able through the marriage law to obtain a victim, the breadth and depth of human misery caused in this way swells to some-

thing appalling. Yet these are only the extreme cases, the lowest abysses; on the way down the scale to them, there is a sad succession of depth after depth with misery increasing all the way. When we are considering domestic or political tyranny, the main point of attending to absolute monsters is to bring out the fact that there is scarcely any horror that can't occur under this tyranny if the despot pleases, which sets in a strong light what must be the terrible frequency of things that are only a little less atrocious. Absolute fiends are as rare as angels, perhaps rarer; but ferocious savages with occasional touches of humanity are common; and in the wide interval that separates these from any worthy representatives of the human species, there is room for many forms and degrees of animality and selfishness. People whose nature lies in that interval often exist under an outward varnish of civilisation and even of culture, living at peace with the law and maintaining a creditable appearance to all who are not under their power, and yet make the lives of all who *are* under their power a torment and a burden. [Mill reminds us of the commonplace cliché about men in general being unfit for power, and remarks that it is seldom thought of in connection with the power that is given to *every* man, however base and ferocious. He repeats the point that a man's conduct outside his home is not a basis for predicting how he treats his wife:] Even the commonest men reserve the violent, the sulky, the undisguisedly selfish side of their character for those who have no power to withstand it. And their ability to do this doesn't just provide an outlet for violence, selfishness etc.; it is also the hothouse in which these vices grow and flourish. A man who is morose or violent to his equals is sure to be one who has lived among inferiors—meaning people who have less power—whom he could frighten or worry into submission. . . . We know that the bad tendencies in human nature are kept within bounds

only when they are allowed no scope for their indulgence. We know that almost everyone to whom others yield goes on encroaching on them until a point is reached at which they are compelled to resist; when this encroachment doesn't come from deliberate purpose, it comes from impulse and habit. Because this is the common tendency of human nature, the almost unlimited power that present social institutions give to a man over his wife. . . . seeks out and encourages the latent seeds of selfishness in the remotest corners of his nature, . . . giving him freedom to indulge the parts of his basic character that in all other relations he would have found it necessary to repress and conceal, and the repression of which would in time have become a second nature. I know that there's another side to the question: if the wife can't effectively •resist, she can at least •retaliate; she can make the man's life extremely uncomfortable, and that power of hers enables her to prevail in many matters where she ought to prevail, and many where she ought not. But this instrument of self-protection—which may be called the power of the scold. . . .—has a fatal defect: it is most effective against the least tyrannical superiors and in favour of the least deserving dependents. It is the weapon of irritable and self-willed women, ones who would make the worst use of power if they themselves had it, and who generally turn *this* power—the power of the scold—to a bad use. . . . And on the other hand, the husbands against whom it is used most effectively are the gentler and more inoffensive, the ones who even when provoked can't bring themselves to resort to any very harsh exercise of authority. The wife's power to be disagreeable usually serves only to establish a counter-tyranny, its victims being chiefly the husbands who are least inclined to be tyrants.

Well, then, what *is* it that in fact tones down the corrupting effects of the •husband's• power so as to allow for

the amount of good that we actually see •in many marriages•? Mere feminine blandishments [= (roughly) 'flirtatious flattery'], though very effective in •individual instances, don't do much to modify the •general tendencies of the situation; because their power lasts only for as long as the woman is young and attractive, often only while her charm is new and not dimmed by familiarity; and on many men they haven't much influence at any time. The real mitigating causes are •four in number•: **(1)** the husband's affection for his wife that grows up in the course of time, to the extent that he is capable of it and her character is sufficiently like his to arouse it; **(2)** their common interests as regards the children. . . .; **(3)** the wife's real importance to the husband's daily comforts and enjoyments, and the value he consequently attaches to her on *his* account, which (if he is capable of feeling for others) prepares the way for him to care about her on *her* account; **(4)** the influence that most human beings naturally acquire over others who are personally near to them and whom they don't outright dislike. Such influence can be exercised through direct entreaties, and through the imperceptible contagion [see note on page 51] of the woman's feelings and dispositions. These factors and devices, unless counteracted by some equally strong personal influence •going in the other direction•, can enable a woman to get an altogether excessive and unreasonable degree of command over the conduct of her husband, her superior.

Through these various means the wife frequently exercises power (sometimes even too much power) over the husband; she can affect his conduct in matters where she may not be qualified to influence it for good. . . .and where he would act better if left to his own devices. (But in families, as in states, •power is not a compensation for •the loss of freedom. Her power often gives her what she has no right to, but doesn't enable her to assert her own rights. A Sultan's

favourite slave has slaves under her, . . . but the desirable thing would be that she should neither have slaves nor be a slave.) By •entirely sinking her own existence in her husband, by •having no will (or persuading him that she has no will) but his in anything concerning their relationship, and by •making it the business of her life to work on his sentiments [see note on page 2], a wife can influence and probably pervert her husband's conduct in matters outside the family that she has never qualified herself to judge of, or in which she is influenced by some personal or other bias or prejudice. Accordingly, as things now are, the husbands who act most kindly to their wives are as likely to be made worse as to be made better by the wife's influence in all matters extending beyond the family. She is taught that she has no business with such matters, and accordingly she seldom has any honest and conscientious opinion on them; so she hardly ever gets involved in them for any legitimate purpose, but generally for a self-interested one. She doesn't know or care which is the *right* side in politics, but she knows what will bring in money or invitations, give her husband a title, her son a government job, or her daughter a good marriage.

### The need for decisions

You might want to say this:

'How can any society exist without government? In a family as in a state some one person must be the ultimate ruler. When married people differ in opinion, who is to decide? They can't both have their way, but a decision one way or the other must be reached.'

[This is one of the few places in this work where Mill uses 'society' in such a way that a married couple constitute a society.] It is not true that in any 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. The commonest kind of voluntary association other than marriage is partnership in business; and no need has been found for a law dictating that in every partnership one partner shall have entire control over the concern and the others will have to obey his orders. No-one would enter into partnership on terms that would subject him to the responsibilities of an executive while giving him only the powers and privileges of a clerk or salesman. . . . The law never does anything like this in regard to business partnerships; but if it *did*, this wouldn't pose as much danger to the rights and interests of the inferior as is posed by law governing marriage. A junior business partner would still be free to cancel the power—i.e. the absolute power that the senior partner has over him—by withdrawing from the partnership. A wife has no such power; and even if she had, it would almost always be desirable that she should avail herself of it only as a last resort.

It's quite true that things that have to be decided right away, and can't adjust themselves gradually or wait for a compromise, ought to be decided by just one person. But it doesn't follow that this should always be *the same* person. The natural arrangement is a division of powers between the two, with each being absolute in the executive branch of their own department, and any change of system and principle requiring the consent of both. [That sentence is as Mill wrote it.] The division of powers can't and shouldn't be pre-established by the law, because it must depend on individual capacities and suitabilities. If the two persons chose, they might pre-appoint the division of powers in the marriage contract, as financial arrangements are now often pre-appointed. There would seldom be any difficulty in deciding such things by mutual consent, unless the marriage was one of those unhappy ones where everything, including this, becomes a subject of bickering and dispute. The



division of rights would naturally follow the division of duties and functions. . . .

[When in this next paragraph Mill speaks of what 'will' be the case, he evidently means what will be the case after the law governing marriage is amended in the way he is arguing for.] Whoever gets the legal authority, the actual making of decisions will largely depend—as it does now—on comparative qualifications. The husband is usually the older, and that fact alone will in most cases give him more of the decision-making power, at least until the couple have reached a time of life when the difference in their ages doesn't matter. A more powerful voice will naturally also be given to the spouse, whether husband or wife, who brings in the income that the family live on. Inequality from this source doesn't depend on the law of marriage, but on the general conditions of human society as now constituted. The influence of mental superiority, either general or special, is bound to carry much weight, as will superior decisiveness of character; just as they always do at present. And this fact shows how little reason there is to fear that the powers and responsibilities of partners in life (as of partners in business) can't be satisfactorily divided up by agreement between themselves. They always *are* divided up like that, except in cases in which the marriage institution is a failure. Decision-making never comes down to •all the power on one side and •sheer obedience on the other, except where the marriage has been a total mistake and it would be a blessing to both parties to be relieved from it. You may think this: 'What makes a peaceful settlement of differences possible is the power of legal compulsion that both sides know to be in reserve; just as people submit to arbitration because in the background there's a court of law that they know they can be forced to obey.' [What makes this work in matters other than marriage, Mill goes on to say, is its not being known in advance which side would win if the

dispute were put in the hands of the law; but that isn't the case in marriages, where the law always favours the husband. The power the law gives him may incline the wife to settle for a compromise, but it won't incline the husband to do so! He continues:] There is always among decent people a practical compromise, though one of them is under no physical or moral necessity of making it; and this fact shows that (except in unfavourable cases) marriage partners are led by natural motives to voluntarily adjust their behaviour in ways that are acceptable to both. This situation is certainly not improved by having laws which ordain that this superstructure of free government is to be built on a legal foundation of despotism on one side and subjection on the other, so that the despot can—on a whim, and without warning—rescind any concession he has made. No freedom is worth much when held on such a precarious tenure; and anyway it is not likely to work in a fair way when the law throws so much weight into one scale. . . .

### **Would liberated women be fair?**

A stubborn opponent with his back to the wall may say this:

Husbands indeed are willing to be reasonable, and to make fair concessions to their partners without being forced to; but wives are not. If wives are allowed any rights of their own, they won't acknowledge rights for anyone else, and they'll never give way on anything unless they are compelled by the man's mere authority to give way on everything.

Many people would have said this some generations ago, when satires on women were fashionable and men thought it clever to insult women for being what men made them. But it won't be said *now* by anyone who is worth replying to. The currently fashionable doctrine is not that women are less

apt than men are to have good feelings and consideration for their spouses. On the contrary, we are perpetually told that women are *better* than men, this being said by people who are totally opposed to treating them as if they were as good; so that the saying about women's natural goodness has become a piece of tiresome cant, intended to put a complimentary face on an injury. . . . If women really are better than men in anything, it surely is in self-sacrifice on behalf of their family. But I don't want to stress this at a time when they are universally taught that they are born and created for self-sacrifice. I believe that equality of rights would lessen the exaggerated self-denial that is the present artificial ideal of feminine character, and that a good woman would not be more self-sacrificing than the best man: whereas men would be much more unselfish and self-sacrificing than they are at present because they would no longer be taught to worship their own will as such a grand thing that it is actually the law for another human being. There is nothing that men so easily learn as this self-worship: all privileged persons, and all privileged classes, have had it. The more we descend in the social scale, the more intense it is; and its greatest intensity is in those who aren't, and can't expect ever to be, raised above anyone except an unfortunate wife and children. There are fewer honourable exceptions to this than to almost any other human infirmity. Philosophy and religion, instead of keeping it in check, are generally suborned [= 'bribed or bullied'] into defending it; and nothing controls it but *the practical feeling of the equality of human beings*, which is Christianity's theory but will never be its practice until it stops supporting institutions based on an arbitrary preference for one human being over another.

No doubt there are women, as there are men, who won't be satisfied with mere equality of consideration—ones with whom there is no peace until their own will or wish is the

only one that counts. Such people are a proper subject for the law of divorce. They are only fit to live alone, and no human beings ought to be compelled to live with them. But the legal subordination tends to increase the frequency of such characters among women. If the man exercises his whole power, the woman is of course crushed: but if he treats her more permissively and *allows* her to exercise some power, there is no rule to set limits to how far she takes this. Because the law doesn't determine her rights and •theoretically allows her none at all, •practically declares that she has a right to anything she can contrive to get.

### **The moral education of mankind**

One way to make the marriage relationship even-handedly fair and conducive to the happiness of both spouses is the equality of married persons before the law. It isn't the only way to bring this about, but it's the only way to make the daily life of mankind a school of moral cultivation.

[Mill is going to discuss a very general moral view of his, about the importance of regarding and treating all human beings as equals. One part of this is

the equality of all persons before the law;

and that implies or includes

the equality of married persons before the law,

which is what links the special topic of this work to the more general topic that Mill is now going to discuss.]

Though the truth may not be felt or generally accepted for generations to come, the only school of genuine moral sentiment is society between equals. Until now mankind's moral education has mainly come from the law of force, and has adapted almost solely to the relations that force creates. In the less advanced states of society, people barely have the notion of an *equal*: to be an equal is for them to be an enemy. Society as a whole is one long ladder,

where every individual is either above or below his nearest neighbour, and wherever he doesn't command he must obey. So existing moralities are mainly fitted to a relation of command and obedience. But command and obedience are merely unfortunate necessities of human life; society in equality is its normal state. Already in modern life, and increasingly so as it progressively improves, command and obedience become special cases whereas equal association is the general rule. The morality of the first ages [Mill's phrase] rested on **(1)** the obligation to submit to power; and the morality of the ages next following rested on **(2)** the right of the weak to the forbearance and protection of the strong. How much longer is one form of society and life to content itself with the morality made for another? We have had **(1)** the morality of submission, and **(2)** the morality of chivalry and generosity; the time has now come for **(3)** the morality of justice. Whenever in earlier times any approach was made to society in equality, justice was claimed to be the foundation of virtue. That is how it was in the free republics of antiquity; but even in the best of these, the equals were limited to the free male citizens; slaves, women, and residents without a vote were under the law of force. The joint influence of Roman civilisation and of Christianity obliterated these distinctions, and in theory (if only partially in practice) declared the claims of the human being as such to outrank the claims of sex, class, or social position. The barriers that had begun to be levelled were raised again by the northern conquests [Mill's phrase]; and the whole of modern history consists of the slow process of grinding them down again. We are now entering into an order of things in which justice will again be the primary virtue, based as before on association of equals but now also on association of sympathy [here = 'fellow feeling']. Justice is no longer rooted in the instinct of equals for self protection, but in a cultivated sympathy between equals;

and because no-one is now left out, an equal measure of fellow-feeling is extended to all. It's well known that human beings don't clearly foresee their own changes, and that their sentiments are adapted to past ages rather than to future ones. To see the future of the species has always been the privilege of the intellectual élite, or of those who have learned from them; to have the feelings that mankind will have in the future has been the distinction—and usually the martyrdom—of a still rarer élite. Institutions, books, education, society, all go on training human beings for the old way of looking at things even while the new one is coming, and long after it has actually come. But the true virtue of human beings is **fitness to live together as equals**; claiming nothing for themselves except what they freely concede to everyone else; regarding command of any kind as an exceptional and temporary necessity; and preferring the society of those who are willing to take turns leading and following. Life as at present constituted does not help to develop these virtues by allowing them to be practised. The family is a school of despotism, in which the virtues of despotism, but also its vices, are nourished. Citizenship in free countries is partly a school of society in equality; but citizenship fills only a small place in modern life and comes nowhere near to people's daily habits or inmost sentiments. If the family were justly constituted, it would be the real school of the virtues of freedom. It is sure to be a good enough school for everything else: it will always be a school of obedience for the children and of command for the parents. What is needed is for the family to be a school of *sympathy in equality*, of living together in love, without power on one side or obedience on the other. That's what it ought to be between the parents. It would then be an exercise of those virtues that each spouse requires to fit him or her for all other relationships; and it would be a model to the children

of the feelings and conduct that could become habitual and therefore natural to them—that being the intended end-point of their *temporary* training by means of obedience. [Mill goes on to say that ‘the moral training of mankind’ will never be satisfactory until it has as a basis a morally satisfactory family structure.]

Even under the present law, many married people (in the higher classes of England probably a great majority of them) live in the spirit of a just law of equality. I readily admit this; indeed it is the very foundation of my hopes. Laws never would be improved if there weren’t many people whose moral sentiments are better than the existing laws. Such people ought to support the position I am advocating here, because its only objective is to make all other married couples similar to what *they* are now. But even persons of considerable moral worth, unless they are also thinkers, are very ready to believe that laws or practices from which they haven’t personally suffered any harm •don’t do harm to anyone, •probably do good (if they seem to be generally approved of), and •ought not to be objected to. The legal conditions of the marriage tie may not occur to the thoughts of such people once in a year, and they live and feel in every way as though they were legally equals; but they would be making a great mistake if they supposed that the same is the case with all other married couples (or anyway with all in which the husband is not a notorious ruffian). . . . In fact, the less fit a man is for the possession of power—the less likely to be allowed to exercise it over anyone with that person’s voluntary consent—the more he •soothes himself with the awareness of the power the law gives him, •exercises that power to the utmost point that custom (the custom of men like himself!) will tolerate, and •enjoys using the power as a way of enlivening his agreeable sense of possessing it. Furthermore: in the naturally most brutal and morally

uneducated part of the lower classes, the legal slavery of the wife and something in her merely physical subjection to the husband’s will (her role as his *instrument*) causes him to feel a disrespect and contempt towards her that he doesn’t feel towards any other woman—or any other human being—with whom he comes in contact; and this makes her seem to him an *appropriate* subject for any kind of indignity. . . .

Perhaps we’ll be told that religion imposes the duty of obedience on women—as *every* established fact that is too bad to be defended in any other way is said to be required by religion. Indeed the church does enjoin obedience in her marriage rituals, but it would be hard to derive any such command from Christianity. We are told that St. Paul said, ‘Wives, obey your husbands’, but he also said, ‘Slaves, obey your masters.’ His business was the propagation of Christianity, and it wouldn’t help him in *that* to incite anyone to rebel against existing laws. His acceptance of all social institutions as he found them doesn’t express a disapproval of attempts to improve them at the proper time, any more than his declaration ‘The powers that be are ordained by God’ implies support for military despotism as the only Christian form of political government. . . . To claim that Christianity was intended to freeze existing forms of government and society, protecting them against change, is to reduce it to the level of Islamism or of Brahminism. It is precisely because Christianity has *not* done this that it has been the religion of the •progressive portion of mankind, and Islamism and the rest have been the religions of the •stationary portions, or rather of the •declining portions (because there’s no such thing as a really stationary society). Throughout the history of Christianity there have been plenty of people trying to make it something of the same kind, converting us into a sort of Christian Moslems with the Bible for a Koran, prohibiting all improvement. These people have been powerful, and

resistance to them has cost many other people their lives. But they *have* been resisted; the resistance has made us what we are; and will yet make us what we are to be. [That last clause is as Mill wrote it. You might care to think about what he might mean by 'what we are to be'.]

### Property rights

After what I have said about the 'general' obligation of obedience, it is almost superfluous to say anything about the more specific topic of a woman's right to her own property. . . . The rule is simple: whatever would be the wife's if she were not married should be under her exclusive control during marriage, and similarly for the husband. This still leaves them free to tie up property by settlement, in order to preserve it for children. Some people are shocked by the idea of a wife and a husband having separate interests in money matters; this, they sentimentally think, is inconsistent with the ideal fusion of two lives into one. 'They are **(a)** right about the ideal, **(b)** wrong about the practice'. Speaking for myself: I strongly support **(a)** community of goods when this results from a complete unity of feeling among the owners, but I have no taste for a **(b)** community of goods that relies on the doctrine that what is mine is yours but what is yours is not mine; and I would choose not to entire into such a contract with anyone, even if I were the person to profit by it.

This particular injustice and oppression to women is to the casual observer more obvious than all the rest; and it could be remedied without interfering with any other mischiefs, and there can't be much doubt that it *will* be one of the first to be remedied. Many states in the USA have gone so far as to put into their written Constitutions provisions that guarantee women equality of rights in this respect. At least for a woman who has property, this materially improves

her situation in the marriage relation by leaving her one instrument of power that she hasn't signed away; and it also prevents the scandalous abuse of the marriage institution in which a man traps a girl into marrying him without a settlement, purely so as to get her money. When the support of the family depends on earnings, the common arrangement in which •the man earns the income and •the wife superintends the domestic expenditure seems to me in general the most suitable division of labour between them. Given that the wife has

- the physical suffering of bearing children,
- the whole responsibility of their care and education in early years, and
- the careful use of the husband's earnings for the general comfort of the family,

she does not only her fair share but usually the larger share of the bodily and mental exertion required by their joint existence. If she takes on any further share 'by having paid employment outside the family', it seldom relieves her from this [meaning: 'from care of the children and management of the household'] but only prevents her from doing it properly. 'And that is very serious, because' the care that she now can't take of the children and the household isn't taken by anyone else; the survivors among the children have to grow up as they best can, and the management of the household is likely to be so bad as to cancel much of the monetary value of the wife's earnings. In a just state of things, I don't think it is desirable that the wife should usually contribute by her labour to the income of the family. In an unjust state of things 'such as we now have', her doing so may be useful to her by increasing her value in the eyes of the man who is legally her master; but against that it also enables him to abuse his power still further by *forcing* her to work and provide the family's entire financial support, while he spends

most of his time in drinking and idleness. If a woman doesn't have independent property, the power to *earn* is essential to her dignity. But if

- marriage were an equal contract, not implying the obligation of obedience; if
- the marriage tie were no longer *enforced* on those who are oppressed by it, so that a separation on fair terms (I'm not talking here about divorce) could be obtained by any woman who was morally entitled to it; and if
- she then found all honourable employments as freely open to her as to men,

she wouldn't need for her own protection to make this particular use of her abilities during marriage. Like a man when he chooses a profession, so a woman who marries can in general be understood to be •choosing the management

of a household and the bringing up of a family as the first call upon her exertions, for as many years as may be needed for this purpose; and to be •renouncing all other objects and occupations that are not consistent with this. On that basis, regular occupations outside the home would be practically ruled out for most married women. But it should be thoroughly possible to adapt the general rules to fit individual cases: if a woman has abilities that are exceptionally adapted to some other occupation, she should be allowed to pursue that despite being married; as long as arrangements are made to fill any gap that this might make in her performance of the ordinary functions of mistress of a family. These things might with perfect safety be left to be regulated by opinion, without any interference of law, once public opinion has been rightly directed on the subject.

## CHAPTER 3

### Occupations for women outside marriage

If you agree with me about the equality of women in the family, I don't expect to have much trouble convincing you about the other aspect of the just equality of women, namely their admissibility to all the functions and occupations that have until now been the monopoly of the stronger sex [Mill's phrase]. Why have women's disabilities outside the home been clung to? I mean, of course: why have *men* clung to their *belief* in the disabilities of women outside the home? I think it has been in order to maintain their subordination in domestic life, because the general run of the male sex still can't tolerate the idea of living with an equal. If it weren't for that, I think that almost everyone—given the actual state of opinion in politics and economics—would admit the injustice of excluding half the human race from most money-earning occupations, and from almost all high social functions [see note on page 12], decreeing from their birth that either

- they aren't, and can't possibly become, fit for employments that are legally open to the stupidest and lowest of the other sex, or else
- however fit they may be, those employments will be barred to them and reserved for the exclusive benefit of males.

In the last two centuries, when it was thought necessary (it usually wasn't!) to justify the exclusion of women from those functions and occupations, this wasn't often done in terms of their inferior mental capacity. (Actually, no-one back then really believed in that, because in those times the struggles of public life sometimes provided a real test of personal abilities, a test in which women sometimes took part.) The reason given for the exclusion of women in those days was

not women's unfitness but rather the interests of society, meaning the interests of men; just as the most wicked crimes were thought to be explained and excused by the *raison d'état*, meaning the convenience of the government and the support of existing authority. These days power speaks with a smoother tongue: when it oppresses people it always claims to do so for their own good. Thus, when any activity is forbidden to women, it is thought necessary to say (and desirable to believe) that they are incapable of doing it, and that in aiming for it they are leaving their real path of success and happiness. But to make this reason plausible (I don't say valid!), those who offer it must be prepared to push it much further than anyone ventures to do in the face of present experience. It's not enough for them to maintain that

- (1) Women on average are less gifted than men on average, in certain of the higher mental faculties that are needed for higher social functions.

What they have to maintain is that

- (2) No women at all are fit for those functions; the most eminent women are the intellectual inferiors of the most mediocre of the men who currently fulfill those functions.

You may at first think that (2) is wildly extravagant; but think about (1)'s short-fall from what is needed to defend the status quo. All you can get from (1) is

- (3) fewer women than men are fit for occupations and functions of the highest intellectual character.

If that is as far as we can go, then if the performance of a given important function is decided by competition or in any other way that respects the interests of the public, there's

no need to fear its falling into the hands of women inferior to average men, or to the average of their male competitors. The only result will be that there will be fewer women than men in such employments; and that is bound to happen in any case, if only because most women are likely to prefer the one vocation in which there's nobody to compete with them. Now, *no-one* will now support (2), not even the most determined depreciator of women. Down through the years, women—*many* women—have shown themselves to be capable of everything that men do, and of doing it successfully and creditably. The most that can be said is that there are many things that no woman has succeeded in doing as well as they have been done by some men—many in which women have not reached the very highest rank. But there are extremely few activities depending only on mental skills in which women haven't attained the second-to-highest rank. Isn't this *more* than enough to make the refusal to let them compete with men for these roles a tyranny to them and a detriment to society? Isn't it a mere truism to say that such functions are often filled by men who •are far less fit for them than plenty of women and •would be beaten by women in any fair competition? 'Perhaps there are some, fully employed in other ways, who are even better qualified for the functions in question than these women.' What of it? Isn't this the case in all competitions? Is there such a surplus of men fit for high duties that society can afford to reject the service of any competent person? Finding a man who is just right for some duty or function of social importance that falls vacant—are we *always* so sure we can do this that we lose nothing by ruling out half of mankind, refusing in advance to make any use of their abilities, however distinguished they may be? And even if we could do without them, would it be *just* to refuse to them their fair share of honour and distinction. . . .? And the injustice isn't confined to them: it is shared by all

who might benefit by their services. To ordain that no-one of a certain kind may be a physician, or a lawyer, or a Member of Parliament, is to injure not only persons of that kind but also anyone who employs physicians or lawyers, or elects Members of Parliament. . . .

### Women as governors

Perhaps it will be enough if in the details of my argument I confine myself to functions of a public nature: if I succeed regarding those, it will probably be readily granted that women should be admissible to *any* occupation where it matters whether they are admitted or not. Let me begin by selecting one function. . . .their right to which is entirely independent of any thesis about their abilities. I mean the vote, both parliamentary and municipal. The •right to share in the choice of those who are to exercise a public trust is utterly distinct from the •right to compete for the trust itself. If to vote for a Member of Parliament one had to be fit to be a candidate, the government would be a narrow oligarchy indeed! To have a voice in choosing those by whom one is to be governed is a means of self-protection that everyone should have, even ones who are for ever excluded from the function of governing; and that includes women. They must be thought fit to have such a choice, because the law already gives to a woman the most important choice of all—the choice of the man who is to govern her throughout her life, which is always supposed to be voluntarily made by herself. . . . There's not a shadow of justification for not allowing women the vote under whatever conditions, and within whatever limits, men are allowed it. The majority of women of any class are unlikely to differ in political opinion from the majority of the men of the same class, unless the issue somehow involves the interests of women as such; and



in that case women require the votes as their guarantee of just and equal consideration. This ought to be obvious even to those who reject every other doctrine I have been arguing for: even if every woman were a wife, and every wife ought to be a slave, these slaves would stand in need of legal protection, and we know what legal protection slaves have when the laws are made by their masters.

With regard to women's fitness not only to participate in elections but themselves to hold offices or practise professions involving important public responsibilities: I have already remarked that this consideration isn't **essential** to the practical question under discussion, because any woman who succeeds in an open profession thereby proves that she is qualified for it. As for public offices: if the country's political system excludes unfit men, it will equally exclude unfit women; and if it doesn't, there is no *additional* evil in the fact that the unfit persons whom the system admits may be either women or men. Thus, as long as it is admitted that even a few women may be fit for these duties, the laws that shut the door on those exceptions can't be justified by any opinion that can be held regarding the abilities of women in general. But though this last consideration is not **essential**, it is far from being irrelevant. An unprejudiced view of women's competence strengthens the arguments against their subjection, reinforcing them by high considerations of practical benefit.

Let us start by entirely setting aside all psychological considerations tending to show that any of the mental differences supposed to exist between women and men are only effects of differences in their education and circumstances, and don't indicate any radical difference—let alone any radical inferiority—of nature. Let us consider women only as they actually are or are known to have been, and the abilities that they have already shown in practice.

Anything that they have done at least proves that they can do *that*! When we consider how carefully they are all trained away from (rather than towards) any of the occupations or objects reserved for men, it becomes evident that I am taking a very humble ground for them [Mill's phrase] when I base their case on what they have actually achieved, because in this matter negative evidence is worth little, whereas any positive evidence is conclusive. No woman has yet actually produced works comparable to those of Homer, Aristotle, Michelangelo, or Beethoven, but it doesn't follow from this that that no woman *can* attain any such height as they did. The negative fact merely leaves the question uncertain, and open to psychological discussion. On the other hand, it is quite certain that a woman *can* be a Queen Elizabeth or a Deborah or a Joan of Arc, because this is not inference but fact. [Deborah was a judge and had command of an army in ancient Israel. See Judges 4–5.] It's an odd thing that the only things the existing law excludes women from doing are the very ones that they have proved they *can* do! There is no law to prevent a woman from having written all the plays of Shakespeare, or composed all the operas of Mozart. But if Queen Elizabeth and Queen Victoria had not inherited the throne they couldn't have been entrusted with the smallest political duties—the sort of duties in which Queen Elizabeth showed herself to be supreme.

If anything conclusive could be inferred from empirical data without psychological analysis, it would be that the things women aren't allowed to do are the very ones for which they are specially qualified. Their aptitude for government has become conspicuous through the very few opportunities they have been given; whereas in lines of distinction that apparently were freely open to them they have by no means so eminently distinguished themselves.

History presents us with far fewer reigning queens than kings, but a talent for ruling has been shown by a higher proportion of the queens than of the kings—despite the fact that many of the queens have occupied the throne in difficult periods.

It is remarkable too that they have often been distinguished by merits flatly opposite to the imaginary and conventional character of women: they have been noted for their rule's firmness and vigour as much as for its intelligence. When to queens and empresses we add regents and viceroys of provinces, the list of eminent women rulers swells to a great length.<sup>2</sup> This is so clearly the case that someone once tried to run the argument in reverse, turning the admitted truth into an additional insult by saying that queens are better than kings because under kings women govern, but under queens men do.

It may seem a waste of reasoning to argue against a bad joke; but such things do affect people's minds, and I have heard men quote this saying in a manner suggesting that they thought there is something in it. Anyway, it will serve well enough as a starting-point for my discussion. So: it is not true that under kings women govern. Such cases are entirely exceptional, and weak kings have governed badly through the influence of male favourites as often as of female. When a king is governed by a woman merely because of his love relationships, good government is not probable, though even then there are exceptions. But French history counts

two kings who chose to have affairs directed for many years by a woman—one to his sister, the other to his mother. One of them, Charles VIII, was a mere boy, but in giving power to his sister he was following the intentions of his father Louis XI, the ablest monarch of his age. The one whose mother was powerful in his reign was Louis IX, since canonized and now known as Saint Louis. He was the best and one of the most vigorous rulers since the time of Charlemagne. Both of these princesses—Charles's sister and Louis's mother—ruled in a manner hardly equalled by any prince among their contemporaries. The Emperor Charles V, the most politic prince of his time, had as many able men in his service as a ruler ever had, and was utterly unlikely to sacrifice his interests to personal feelings; yet he made two princesses of his family successive governors of the Netherlands. . . . Both ruled very successfully, and one of them, Margaret of Austria, was one of the ablest politicians of the age. So much for one side of the joke. As for the other: When it is said that under queens men govern, is this meant to be taken in the same way as the statement that kings are governed by women? Is it meant that queens choose the associates of their personal pleasures as their instruments of government? The case is rare even with queens who are as unscrupulous in their love affairs as Catherine II [Catherine the Great, of Russia]: and we won't find in these rare cases the good government that is supposed to arise from male influence on queens. So if it is true that the administration of a country is in the

<sup>2</sup> Especially if we bring in Asia as well as Europe. If a Hindu principality is strongly, vigilantly, and economically governed; if order is preserved without oppression; if the people are prosperous and culture is growing among them, three times out of four that principality is under a woman's rule. [The bit about 'culture' replaces Mill's 'cultivation is extended', which could mean something more like 'agriculture is thriving'.] I have gathered this surprising fact from a long knowledge of Hindu governments. There are many examples of this; for although Hindu institutions won't let a woman reign, she is the legal regent of a kingdom while the heir to the throne is a minor; and minorities are frequent in India because male rulers there often die young through the effect of inactivity and sensual excesses. Bear in mind that these princesses have never been seen in public, have never conversed with any man not of their own family except from behind a curtain, don't read, and if even they did there's no book in their languages that could give them the slightest instruction on political affairs—they provide a very striking example of women's natural capacity for government.

hands of better men under a queen than under an average king, it must be that queens are better able to choose good men; and women must be better qualified than men both to be sovereign and to be Prime Minister, because the Prime Minister's principal business is not to govern in person but to find the fittest people to run every department of public affairs. . . . But actually most great queens have been great by their own talents for government more than by their talent for picking good ministers. . . . They kept the supreme direction of affairs in their own hands; and if they listened to good advisers, that was itself the strongest proof that their judgment fitted them for dealing with the great questions of government.

Is it reasonable to think that those who are fit for the greater functions of politics can't qualify themselves for the less? We know this:

(1) The wives and sisters of monarchs, when they are called on, are found to be as competent as the monarchs themselves in the business of royalty.

There is no reason *in the nature of things* why this shouldn't also be true:

(2) The wives and sisters of statesmen, administrators, company directors, and managers of public institutions are capable of doing what is done by their brothers and husbands.

If in fact (2) is not true, the reason for that doesn't lie in the nature of things. The real reason why wives etc. of kings have done better than we would expect the wives etc. of business men to do is plain enough. It has to do with how princesses have related to the common run of men; their *rank has put them above* men to a greater extent than their *sex has put them below* them. So they haven't been taught that it was improper for them to concern themselves with politics; but have been allowed to feel the wide-ranging

interest that is natural to *any* cultivated human being in the great events occurring around them, events in which they might be called on to take a part. The only women who are allowed the same range of interests and freedom of development as men are the ladies of reigning families, and it is precisely in their case that no inferiority is found. Women's capacities for government have been found adequate in every place where they have been tried, and to the extent that they have been tried.

### Practice versus theory

This fact fits with the best general conclusions that our imperfect experience seems to suggest concerning the special tendencies and aptitudes that are typical of women, as women have hitherto been. I don't say '...as they will continue to be' because (I repeat) it would be presumptuous to make claims about what women are or are not, can or cannot be, by their natural constitution. They have always been kept in such an unnatural state (as regards spontaneous development) that their nature must have been greatly distorted and disguised; and no-one can safely assert that any significant difference would show up between men's and women's characters and capacities if women's nature were left to choose its direction as freely as men's. . . . I'll show later on that even the most undeniable differences that now exist between the sexes may have been produced merely by circumstances, without any difference of natural capacity. Still, looking at women as they are known in experience, we can say (with more truth than most generalisations about women possess) that the general bent of their talents is towards *the practical*. This statement is consistent with all the public history of women, past and present. It is also confirmed by common and daily experience. The mental

capacities that are most characteristic of a woman of talent are all of a kind that fits them for practice, and makes them tend towards it. What is meant by a woman's being good at *intuitive perception*? It means *rapid and correct insight into present fact*. It has nothing to do with general principles: nobody ever perceived a scientific law of nature by intuition, or reached a general rule of duty or prudence by it. These laws and rules are results of slow and careful collection and comparison of empirical data, and 'intuitive' people—men or women—don't usually shine in this department, unless they can acquire the needed experience by themselves. That 'unless...' condition is crucial, because their so-called 'intuitive' insight makes them especially good at arriving at such general truths as can be collected from their individual observations. So when they happen to be as well provided as men are with the results of other people's experience, by reading and education, women are better equipped than men generally are with what is needed for practical success. (I say *happen* to be, because it won't be a result of anyone's designs; in respect of the knowledge that tends to fit them for the greater concerns of life, the only educated women are self-educated.) Highly educated men are apt to be deficient in the sense of *present fact*; in the facts they have to deal with they don't see what is really there but what they have been taught to expect. This is seldom the case with women of any ability: their capacity for 'intuition' preserves them from it. When a man and a woman are equal in what experience they have had and in general intellectual level, she will usually see much more of what is immediately before them than he will; and this awareness of the present is the main quality that is needed for practical (as distinct from theoretical) ability. . . . Of course there can be no good practice without principles; and I admit another drawback in this aspect of a woman's abilities, namely that her quickness of observation has

such a dominant place in her abilities that she is especially apt to form rash generalisations on the basis of her own observation; though she is equally ready to correct those generalisations when her range of data widens. But the corrective to this defect is access to the experience of the human race, i.e. general knowledge, which is exactly the thing that education can best provide. A woman's mistakes are like those a clever self-educated man, who often sees things that are overlooked by men who have been through training-drills, but falls into errors through ignorance of things that have long been known. . . .

Women's minds, then, are drawn to the present, to the real, to actual fact; this can be a source of errors because of what it leaves out, but it is also a useful antidote to the contrary error. Where theorising minds primarily and typically go wrong is through having too little of this lively perception and ever-present sense of *objective fact*. [Mill says this about 'speculative minds'. In this version, his uses of 'speculation' and its cognates will be replaced by 'theorising' and its cognates.] For lack of this they often overlook conflicts between outward facts and their theories, and also

lose sight of the legitimate purpose of theorising in the first place, and let their theory-building skills stray into regions that are populated

not by real beings, animate or inanimate or even idealised, but by personified shadows created by the illusions of metaphysics or by the mere entanglement of words,

and think these shadows are the proper objects of the highest philosophy.

For a theorist who is engaged not in collecting empirical data but in working data up by processes of thought into comprehensive truths of science and laws of conduct, hardly anything can be of more value than to do this work with a

really superior woman as a companion and critic. There's nothing comparable to this for keeping his thoughts within the limits of real things and the actual facts of nature. . . . A woman's mind is always directed towards dealing with things as individuals rather than in groups, and—closely connected with that—to having a more lively interest than a man does in the present feelings of persons; and this aspect of her mind determines how she approaches anything that claims to have practical applications. For her the first question is always 'How will individual people be affected by this?' So she is extremely unlikely to put faith in any theory that loses sight of individuals and **(a)** deals with things as if they existed for the benefit of some imaginary entity, some mere creation of the mind that doesn't **(b)** boil down to the feelings of living beings. [Mill has in mind here (perhaps among other things) the difference between two views of morality: **(a)** in one kind, questions like 'Was that action **wrong**?' and 'Would that be a **good** outcome?' are somehow basic; **(b)** in the other, such questions are mere conceptual vehicles for really basic questions such as 'Did that **hurt** anyone?' and 'Is that something we would **try to bring about**?' In the last chapter of *Utilitarianism* Mill tries to explain the **(a)** notion of *justice* in terms of **(b)** facts about how people think and feel and act.] Women's thoughts are thus as useful in giving reality to thinking men's thoughts as men's thoughts are in giving **breadth** and **scope** to women's. In **depth**, as distinguished from breadth, I strongly suspect that women, even now, do as well as men.

If it's true that women's existing mental characteristics are valuable aids even in •theorising, they are still more important in •applying theories to the world. I have explained why women are less likely than men to fall into the error of sticking to a rule in a case whose special features make the rule inapplicable or require it to be specially modified. Another of the admitted superiorities of clever women is

greater quickness on the uptake; isn't this pre-eminently a quality that fits a person for practice? In •action, everything constantly depends on prompt decisions; in •theorising nothing does. [In reading on, remember that in Mill's day 'philosophy' was still used to cover science. A magazine of that day includes an advertisement for 'a more philosophical way of making coffee'.] A mere thinker can wait, take time to consider, collect more evidence; he isn't under pressure to complete his philosophy at once so as not to miss his opportunity. [Mill says that the theorising 'philosopher' may be helped by an ability to draw plausible conclusions from inadequate data; but that is a side-help to his work, not at the centre of it; and anyway the theorist doesn't have to do it in a hurry; he can slog away slowly 'until a conjecture has become a theorem'. Mill continues the contrast thus:] For those whose business is with the fleeting and perishable—with individual facts, not kinds of facts—*speed* of thought is second only to *power* of thought in importance. If someone dealing with the contingencies of action doesn't have his faculties under *immediate* command, he might as well not have them! He may be fit to criticise, but he isn't fit to act. Now, *this* is what women are agreed to excel at—women and men who are most like women. The other sort of man, however able he may be, arrives slowly at complete command of his faculties: rapidity of judgment and promptness of judicious action, even in the affairs he knows best, are the gradual and late result of strenuous effort grown into habit.

### 'Nervous temperament'

It may be said that women's greater nervous susceptibility disqualifies them for any practical activities except domestic ones, by making them

- mobile,
- changeable,
- too intensely under the influence of the moment,
- incapable of dogged perseverance,
- uneven and uncertain in their command of their faculties.

Those phrases, I think, sum up most of the objections commonly made to women's fitness for the higher class of serious business. In so far as the phrases apply, much of this is the mere overflow of nervous energy run to waste, and would cease when the energy was given a definite purpose. Much is also the result of conscious or unconscious cultivation [i.e. results from social leads and pressures]; as we see from the almost total disappearance of 'hysterics' and fainting-fits since they have gone out of fashion. Moreover, when people are brought up as . . . a kind of hot-house plants, shielded from the wholesome ups and downs of air and temperature, and not trained in any of the occupations that make the blood flow and strengthen the muscles, while the emotional part of their nervous system is kept in unnaturally active play, it's no wonder if those of them who don't die of consumption [= 'tuberculosis'] grow up with constitutions that are liable to be upset by slight causes, both internal and external, without the stamina to keep up any physical or mental task 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 sedentary work in small unhealthy rooms. Women who in their early years have shared in the healthy physical upbringing and bodily freedom of their brothers, and who have enough pure air and exercise in adult life, rarely have excessively fragile nervous systems that would disqualify them for active pursuits. There are indeed some people—men and women—who have an unusual degree

of nervous sensibility as a feature of their constitution, a feature which they have so strongly that it has more influence than anything else does over every aspect of their health. Like other aspects of one's physical constitution, this so-called 'nervous temperament' is hereditary, and is transmitted to sons as well as daughters; but it could be—and apparently *is*—inherited by more women than men. Assuming that this is so, let us ask: Are *men* with the nervous temperament found to be unfit for the duties and pursuits usually followed by men? If not, why should *women* of the same temperament be unfit for them? Peculiarities of temperament are, within certain limits, obstacles to success in some employments though aids to success in some others. Men of high nervous sensibility have succeeded brilliantly in occupations that are suitable to that temperament—and sometimes even in one's that aren't. The main way in which the temperament contributes to a man's practical success is this:

Because he is susceptible of a higher degree of excitement than people with a different physical constitution, the difference between •his powers when they and he are aroused and •his powers at other times is greater than the corresponding difference in other people. In his excited state he is raised above himself, as it were, and easily does things that he couldn't possibly do at other times.

This lofty excitement is usually not a mere flash that •leaves no permanent traces and •is incompatible with persistent and steady pursuit of an objective. It is typical of the nervous temperament to be capable of *sustained* excitement that holds out through long-continued efforts. It is what is meant by 'spirit'. It is what makes the high-bred racehorse maintain his speed till he drops down dead. It is what has enabled so many delicate women to maintain the most sublime constancy. . . .through lengthy mental and bodily

tortures. People with this temperament are particularly well suited for the *executive department* of the leadership of mankind. They are the material of great orators, great preachers, impressive spreaders of moral influences. You might think that their constitution makes them less suitable for the role of a statesman in the cabinet, or of a judge; and so it would, if it were the case that people who are excitable must always be in a state of excitement. But this is wholly a question of training. Strong self-control can grow out of and contain strong feeling, but strong feeling has to be trained to go that way. When it is, it creates not only the heroes of impulse but also the heroes of self-conquest. History and experience prove that the most passionate characters are the most fanatically rigid in their feelings of duty, when their passion has been trained to act in that direction. The judge who gives a just decision in a case where his feelings draw him strongly to the other side gets *from that same strength of feeling* the fixed sense of the obligation of justice that enables him to win this victory over himself. [And the fine things that such a person achieves in states of high excitement, Mill says, come to affect his character in general, providing standards that he sets for himself at other times. Then:] The thesis that people with excitable temperaments are on average less fit than others for theory or for practice is shown empirically to be false not only of individuals but also of races. The French, and the Italians, are undoubtedly by nature more nervously excitable than the Teutonic races; their habitual daily emotional life is a richer affair than that of the English, at least. But have they been less great than the English in science, in public business, in legal and judicial eminence, or in war? There is abundant evidence that the Greeks of ancient times, like their descendants today, were one of the most excitable of the races of mankind, and they excelled in every kind of human achievement. As an equally

southern people, the ancient Romans probably had the same native temperament: but the stern character of their national discipline, like that of the Spartans, made them an example of the opposite type of national character. The main way in which the strength of their natural feelings showed up was in the intensity with which they worked on replacing their natural temperament with an artificial one. If these cases show what a naturally excitable people can be turned into, the Irish Celts provide a fine example of what such people are when left to themselves (if they can be said to be 'left to themselves', given centuries of indirect influence from bad government and the direct influence of Catholic teaching and of a sincere belief in the Catholic religion). The Irish character must be considered as an unfavourable case, i.e. a naturally excitable people who have not *as a race* achieved anything great. But whenever the circumstances of *individual* Irish Celts have been at all favourable, what people have shown greater capacity for the most varied individual excellence? Like

the French compared with the English,  
the Irish compared with the Swiss,  
the Greeks or Italians compared with the Germans,

so also

women compared with men

may be found on average to do the same things, though with some variety in the details. I don't see the smallest reason to doubt that they would do them every bit as well if their education and development were adapted to correcting instead of worsening the infirmities that their temperament brings.

Suppose for purposes of argument that all this is true:  
Women's minds are naturally more mobile than men's,  
less able to persist for long in one continuous effort,  
more fitted for dividing their abilities among many

things than for travelling a single path to the highest point that can be reached by it; . . . which is why they have climbed as high as the best men in precisely the endeavours that seem to need most of this absorption of the whole mind in one set of ideas and occupations.

[Mill speaks of 'supposing' that to be true, but he crams two qualifications into his 'supposition': it only concerns 'women as they now are', and there are 'great and numerous exceptions' to it. With those two qualifications, it seems, the indented passage expresses something that he thinks probably *is* true.] Still, this difference between women and men can only affect what sort of excellence and achievement each has, not how excellent it is or how practically valuable it is. And the underlying hint in all this that the man's kind of mind is somehow primary, central, optimal, should be challenged. This exclusive working of a part of the mind, this absorption of the whole thinking faculty in a single subject and concentration of it on a single work—is this the normal and healthful condition of the human faculties? It hasn't been shown to be so, even in theorising activities. What this concentration gains in specialised projects is lost, I believe, in the capacity of the mind for the other purposes of life; and even in abstract theorising, I am firmly convinced, the mind achieves more by frequently returning to a difficult problem than by sticking to it without interruption. Anyway, in practical projects, great and small, the ability to pass promptly from one thing to another without letting the active spring of the intellect lose energy between the two is a much more valuable power than the ability to stick at a problem without any breaks; and this more valuable power is one that women pre-eminently possess because of that very 'mobility' of which they are accused. . . . People have often noticed women's ability to do their thinking in circumstances and at times that almost any man would make an excuse to himself for not even trying; and a woman's mind, though it

may be occupied only with small things, can seldom permit itself to be *vacant*, as a man's mind so often is when he isn't engaged in what he chooses to consider the business of his life. . . .

### The size and quality of brains

This is sometimes said: 'There is anatomical evidence that men's mental capacity is superior to women's: they have a larger brain.' In fact, it is by no means established that a woman's brain *is* smaller than a man's. . . . The size of the brain in human beings, anatomists say, varies much less than the size of the body or even of the head, and the one can't be at all inferred from the other. Some women certainly have as large a brain as any man. I know of a man who weighed many human brains and said that the heaviest he knew of. . . . was that of a woman. Furthermore, the precise relation between the brain and the intellectual powers is a controversial matter that isn't yet well understood. We can't doubt that there is a very close relation. The brain is certainly the material organ of thought and feeling (never mind the ongoing controversy about which mental abilities correspond to which parts of the brain); and it would be anomalous—an exception to everything we know of the general laws of life and organisation—if brain-size didn't contribute *something* to mental power. But it would be an equally anomalous exception if the brain influenced thought *only* through its size. In all nature's more delicate operations—of which the physiology of living things are the most delicate, and the workings of the nervous system by far the most delicate of these—differences in the effect depend on differences of •quality in the physical agents as much as on their •quantity; and if we judge by outputs, the level of fineness of quality in the brains and nervous systems of women is higher on



average than that of men. Never mind abstract difference of quality, which is hard to verify. We know that an organ's efficiency depends not only on its •size but on its •activity: and we can get a rough measure of this in how energetically the blood circulates through the organ, because the organ's activities and its ability to repair itself depend mainly on blood-circulation. The differences that we see between the mental operations of the two sexes suggest that men on the average have the advantage in the size of the brain, and women in the activity of blood in the brain. That conjecture about difference of brain-organisation, based on analogy, suggests differences in output of kinds that we do most commonly see. ]Mill goes into this a little, along lines already developed. Women are quicker in having thoughts and feelings, but less apt to stay with a given line of thought or activity after it has become tiring. In the first place, men's mental operations might be expected to be slower than women's; men wouldn't be as prompt as women in thinking, or as quick to feel. Mill suggests (though he doesn't explicitly state it) a comparison with wheels: small ones are easier to start going but also easier to stop. Then:] This speculation is *entirely* hypothetical; all it does is to suggest a line of inquiry. I repeat that we don't yet know for sure that *there is any* natural difference in the average strength or direction of the mental capacities of the two sexes. And this can't be known when •the psychological laws of the formation of character have been so little studied. . . .and when •the most obvious *external* causes of difference of character are habitually disregarded—left unnoticed by the observer, and looked down on with haughty contempt by the prevalent schools of natural history and of mental philosophy. Those schools disagree about what the source is of what mainly distinguishes human beings from one another—disagree about whether it is material or spiritual—but they agree in

belittling those who explain these differences in terms of the different ways in which human beings relate to society and to life.

### **Different nations, different views**

People's views about the nature of women are mere empirical generalisations, formed on the basis of the first instances that present themselves, with no help from philosophy or analysis. This is so true that the popular idea of women's nature differs in different countries, according to how women have been shaped by the opinions and social circumstances of the country in question. An oriental thinks that women are by nature peculiarly voluptuous. . . . An Englishman usually thinks that they are by nature cold. The sayings about women's fickleness are mostly French. . . . The English commonly remark on how much more constant women are than men. The attitude that inconstancy is discreditable to a woman has been prevalent in England for much longer than in France; besides which Englishwomen are in their inmost nature much more subdued to opinion •than Frenchwomen are. Incidentally; Englishmen are especially poorly placed to judge what is or isn't natural—to women, or to men, or to human beings altogether—if they have only English experience to go on; because there is no place where human nature shows so little of its basic structure as it does in England. For better and for worse, the English are further from a state of nature than any other modern people; more than any other people, they are a product of civilisation and discipline. England is the country in which social discipline has most succeeded not so much in •conquering as in •suppressing whatever is liable to conflict with it. The English, more than any other people, not only act according to rule but *feel* according to rule. In other countries, the

taught opinion or the social requirement may be the stronger power, but the promptings of the individual nature are always visible under it, and often resisting it: rule may be stronger than nature, but nature is still there. In England, rule has largely *replaced* nature. [Mill develops this line of thought: an Englishman will get human nature wrong because he doesn't see it; a Frenchman sees it, but only in a form distorted by civilisation, so that he gets it wrong too.]

I have said that we can't now know ·for sure· how much of the existing mental difference between men and women is natural and how much artificial, or whether there are any natural differences at all, or *what* they are if there are any. . . . But where certainty can't be had, there may be ways of arriving at some degree of probability. The first question to tackle, and one we have the best chance of answering, is: What is the origin of the differences between women and men that we actually observe? I'll explore for the answer to this along the only path by which it can be reached, namely by tracing the mental consequences of external influences. We can't isolate a human being from his ·social· circumstances, so as to learn experimentally what he would have been by nature; but we can consider •what his circumstances have been, and •what he is, and whether one could have produced the other.

So let us consider the only conspicuous example we can see of apparent inferiority of women to men, apart from the merely physical one of bodily strength. No top-ranking production in philosophy, science, or art has been the work of a woman. Can we explain this without supposing that women are naturally incapable of producing them?

### **Women in the arts and sciences**

The first point is that we don't have enough empirical evidence to support an induction. With a very few exceptions, women didn't begin to try their abilities in philosophy, science, or art until the past three generations. Only in England and France have many made the attempt even today. Calculating the probabilities, was it to be expected that a mind having the requisites of first rate eminence in •theorising or creative work would have shown up during that ·rather short· period of time among the women whose tastes and social situation allowed them to devote themselves to •these pursuits? In every kind of activity that there has been time for, women have done quite as much (at all but the very highest ranks in the scale of excellence), and have obtained as many high prizes as could be expected, given the length of time and the number of competitors. This is especially true in the art in which they have been active for the longest, namely literature—both prose and poetry. If we go back to the time when very few women even tried, some of those few were highly successful. The Greeks always counted Sappho among their great poets; and we may well suppose that Myrtis, who is said to have been •Pindar's teacher, and Corinna, who five times defeated him in the competition for the poetry prize, must at least have been good enough poets to be compared with •that great name. Aspasia did not leave any philosophical writings; but it's an acknowledged fact that Socrates went to her for instruction and reports that he obtained it.

If we consider women's works in modern times, and contrast them with men's, either in literary or in the ·fine· arts, the inferiority that we can see boils down to one thing—a very significant thing—namely a lack of originality. Not a total lack; for any production that has any substantive value

has an originality of its own—is a conception of the mind that produced it, not a copy of something else. The writings of women abound in thoughts that are ‘original’ in the sense of being not borrowed but derived from the thinker’s own observations or intellectual processes. But women haven’t yet produced any of the great and luminous new ideas that form an era in thought, or any of the fundamentally new conceptions in art that open a vista of possible effects not before thought of, and found a new school. Their compositions are mostly based on the existing fund of thought, and their creations don’t deviate far from existing types. This is the sort—the only sort—of inferiority that their works do manifest. There is no inferiority in execution, the detailed application of thought, the perfection of style. In respect of composition and the management of detail, our best novelists have mostly been women; and modern literature doesn’t contain a more eloquent vehicle of thought than the style of Madame de Staël, or a finer specimen of purely artistic excellence than the prose of Madame Sand, whose style acts on the nervous system like a symphony of Haydn or Mozart. What is mainly lacking, I repeat, is high originality of conception. Let me consider how we might explain this deficiency.

Let us remember. . . .that

during all the period in the world’s existence and development of civilisation in which great and fruitful new truths could be arrived at by sheer force of intellect, with little previous study and accumulation of knowledge

women didn’t concern themselves with theorising at all. From the days of Hypatia [a famous mathematician, astronomer and philosopher, 4th century] to those of the Reformation, the illustrious Heloisa is almost the only woman for whom such an achievement might have been possible; and we don’t

know how great a capacity for theory-building may have been lost to mankind by the misfortunes of her life. [Héloïse, as she is usually named these days, was a notable scholar of the 12th century; the ‘misfortunes of her life’ refer to troubles arising from her being the lover of Abelard]. And in the times when a significant number of women have begun to cultivate serious thought, originality has never been easy to achieve. Nearly all the thoughts that can be reached by mere strength of basic intellect were reached long ago; and *originality* in any high sense of that word is now scarcely ever attained except by minds that have undergone elaborate discipline, and are deeply versed in the results of previous thinking. Someone remarked regarding the present age that its most original thinkers are those who have known most thoroughly what their predecessors had thought: and this will always be the case. Every fresh stone in the structure has to be placed on the top of so many others that anyone who wants to take a share in the present stage of the work has to go through a long climb, carrying up materials. How many women have gone through any such process? Mrs. Somerville may be the only woman who knows as much mathematics as is needed for making any considerable mathematical discovery; she happens not to be one of the two or three persons who in her lifetime have been associated with some striking advance in mathematics; is this a proof that women are inferior? Since economics became a science, two women have known enough of it to write usefully on the subject; countless men have written on economics during the same time—of how many of those can we claim more than that they have written usefully? If no woman, so far, has been a great historian, what woman has been learned enough for that? If no woman is a great philologist, what woman has studied Sanscrit and Slavonic, the Gothic of Ulphila and the Persic of the Zendavesta? Even in practical matters we all know

how little value the originality of untaught geniuses has. It means re-inventing in a rudimentary form something already invented and improved on by many successive inventors. When women have had the preparation that all men now need to be importantly original, then we'll be in a position to *begin* judging by experience their capacity for originality.

No doubt it often happens that someone who •hasn't widely and carefully studied the thoughts of others on a subject has through natural intelligence a bright idea which he can suggest but can't prove, but which when matured may be an important addition to knowledge. But justice can't be done to it until someone who •does have the required knowledge takes it in hand, tests it, gives it a scientific or practical form, and fits it into its place among the existing truths of philosophy or science. Does anyone think that women don't have such ideas? They occur by the hundreds to every woman of intellect. But they are mostly lost for lack of a husband or friend who has the knowledge that enables him to value them properly and bring them before the world; and even when that happens, they usually appear as his ideas, not their real author's. Who can tell how many of the most original thoughts put out by male writers belong to a woman by •suggestion, to the man only by •verifying it and working it out? If I may judge by my own case, a very large proportion indeed! [See the last four lines of the editorial introduction to this text.]

If we turn from pure theory-building to •*literature* in the narrow sense of the term and •the fine arts, there is a very obvious reason why women's literature is broadly...an imitation of men's. Why is Roman literature, as critics proclaim until we are sick of it, not original but an imitation of Greek literature? Simply because the Greeks came first. 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. As it is, they haven't created one, because they found a highly advanced literature already created. If the knowledge of antiquity hadn't been in abeyance for several centuries, or if the Renaissance had occurred before the Gothic cathedrals were built, they never would have been built because the builders would have had models in mind—ancient Greek temples or Renaissance buildings—which would have deprived them of the *freedom* to be original. We see that in France and Italy imitation of ancient literature stopped original development even after it had started. All women who write are pupils of the great male writers. A painter's early pictures, even if he is a Raphael, are indistinguishable in style from his master's. Even a Mozart doesn't display his powerful originality in his earliest pieces. What years are to a gifted individual, generations are to a mass. If women's literature is ever to have a different collective character from men's because of differences in their natural tendencies, it will need much more time than it has had so far before it can free itself from the influence of accepted models and guide itself by its own impulses. I don't think that there will turn out to be any natural tendencies common to women that distinguish their highest intellectual capacities from those of men; but even if that is right, every individual woman writer has her own individual tendencies, which at present are still subdued by the influence of precedent and example; and it will require generations more before their individuality is well enough developed to make headway against that influence.

It is in the *fine arts*, properly so-called, that the prima facie evidence of inferior original powers in women is the strongest, because (it may be said) opinion doesn't exclude them from these but rather encourages them, and in the affluent classes the education of women is mainly composed of training in the fine arts. [In that sentence as Mill wrote it,

there is a charming triple dose of caution: ‘. . . the (i) *prima facie* evidence (etc.) (ii) at first sight (iii) appears to be the strongest.’] Yet the gap between the best that women have done and the highest eminence attained by men has been greater in this line of activity than in many others. What explains this, however, is the familiar fact—more universally true in the fine arts than anywhere else—that professionals are vastly superior to amateurs. Nearly all women in the educated classes are taught a certain amount of some branch of the fine arts, but not so that they can earn their living or their social consequence by it. Women artists are all amateurs. The only exceptions to this confirm the general truth: women are taught music, but only as performers, not as composers; and accordingly men are superior to women in music only as composers, not as performers. The only one of the fine arts that women do seriously follow as a profession and an occupation for life is the theatrical; and it is commonly agreed that in that they are as good as men if not better. To be fair about this, we should compare the productions of women in any branch of art with those of men who don’t follow it as a profession. Women have surely produced musical compositions, for example, that are every bit as good any produced by male amateurs. There are now a few women, a very few, who practise painting as a profession, and these are already beginning to show quite as much talent as could be expected. Even male painters (*pace* Mr. Ruskin) haven’t done anything very remarkable in the last few centuries, and it will be long before they do so. The reason why the old painters were so greatly superior to the modern is that a greatly superior class of men took up painting. In the 14th and 15th centuries the Italian painters were the most accomplished men of their age. The greatest of them had encyclopaedic skills and powers, like the great men of ancient Greece. But in their times fine art was felt and thought to be among the

grandest things in which a human being could excel; and through it men became the companions of sovereigns and the equals of the highest nobility—which they can’t become these days by anything but political or military distinction. In the present age, men of anything like that calibre seek to become famous and useful to the world by something more important than painting; and it is only now and then that a Reynolds or a Turner (of whose relative rank among eminent men I don’t offer an opinion) applies himself to that art. Music belongs to a different order of things; it doesn’t require the same general powers of mind, and seems to depend more on a natural gift; and it may be thought surprising that no great musical composer has been a woman. But even this natural gift can’t be made available for great creations without study and professional devotion to the pursuit. [The only first-rate composers, Mill says, have been German or Italian; and those are countries where the development of women’s intellects is grossly neglected, far worse than France and England. And he adds another point about Germany and Italy: there have probably been *thousands* of men who have learned ‘the principles of musical composition’ and barely *scores* of women who have done so. From this guess, Mill does the math:] On the doctrine of averages, we can’t reasonably expect to see more than one eminent woman to fifty eminent men; and the last three centuries have not produced fifty eminent male composers either in Germany or in Italy.

There are other reasons, too, that help to explain why women remain behind men even in the pursuits that are open to both. For one thing, very few women have time for them. This may seem a paradox, but it is an undoubted social fact. **(1)** The superintending of the family and the domestic expenditure which occupies at least one woman in every family, usually the one of mature years and long

experience; unless the family can afford to hire domestic help, opening the door to waste and dishonesty. Even when the superintending of a household isn't laborious in other ways, it's a very heavy burden on the thoughts; it •requires incessant vigilance, an eye that catches every detail, and it •constantly presents inescapable problems to be solved. If a woman has the rank and wealth to be somewhat relieved from these cares, she still has on her shoulders the management of the family's relations with other families—its relations with 'society', as it is called—and the less she has to do on the domestic side, the greater becomes the 'social' task: dinner parties, concerts, evening parties, morning visits, letter-writing, and all that goes with them. In addition to all this, society imposes on women, and only on them, the engrossing duty of making themselves charming. A clever woman of the higher ranks finds her talents being exercised almost to the full by her development of graces of manner and the arts of conversation. Let us look just at the outward side of the subject. Any woman who attaches any value to dressing well (I don't mean expensively, but with taste and awareness of what is naturally and socially appropriate) must give to her own clothes and perhaps those of her daughters an amount of time and thought that would go a great way towards achieving respectable results in art, or science, or literature<sup>3</sup>. . . . And there is another burden. Independently of the regular domestic and social duties that are laid on a woman, she is expected to have her time and abilities always at the disposal of everybody. Even if a man doesn't have a profession to exempt him from such demands,

no-one is offended if he devotes his time to some pursuit that he has chosen; 'I am busy' is accepted as a valid excuse for not responding to every casual demand that may be made on him. Are a woman's occupations, especially the ones she chooses, ever regarded as excusing her from any of the demands of society? Even her most necessary and recognised duties are barely allowed as exempting her. To be entitled to give precedence to her own •business over other people's •amusement [those are Mill's nouns], she needs an illness in the family or something else out of the common way. . . . Is it surprising, then, if she doesn't reach the highest eminence in activities that require unbroken attention and have to be focussed on as the chief interest of life? Such is philosophy, and such above all is art, in which besides the devotion of •the thoughts and feelings •the hand must also be kept constantly at work to attain high skill.

[Mill now has a paragraph about what is required for 'the great productions that immortalise a name'—far more than what's needed to earn a living as a professional artist. That higher level requires a passionate desire for fame, which carries the person through years of drudgery; and Mill continues:] Women seldom have this eagerness for fame. . . . The influence they seek is over those who immediately surround them. They want to be liked, loved, or admired by those whom they *see*, and they usually settle for the level of proficiency in knowledge, arts etc. that suffices for that. [This fact about women, Mills says, is a product of the circumstances in which society has placed them; it isn't part of their nature; but it is real, and shouldn't be forgotten.

<sup>3</sup> The sound turn of mind that enables a man to acquire a just idea of what is *right* in •ornaments seems to be the same as what gives him good judgment in •the more stable principles of art. Ornamentation has the same centre of perfection as the more serious arts; it's just that it is the centre of a smaller circle.—To illustrate this by fashion in dress, in which there is agreed to be a good or bad taste. . . . He who invents with the most success, or dresses in the best taste, if he had employed his skills and insight to greater purposes, would probably have revealed himself to have just as much skill—i.e. to have formed the same correct taste—in the highest labours of art.—Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses*, Disc. vii.

Also, men are *encouraged* to seek fame, whereas for women] the desire of fame is considered daring and unfeminine. . . . If you have *any* ability to estimate •the influence on the mind of the entire domestic and social position and the whole habit of a life, you'll see that •that influence completely explains nearly all the apparent differences between women and men, including all that imply inferiority •on the part of women•.

### Moral differences

As for moral—as distinct from intellectual—differences, it is commonly said that women are 'better than men'. This empty compliment will provoke a bitter smile from every woman of spirit, because it implies that the situation of women is unique: there's no other context in which it is regarded as natural and suitable that the better should obey the worse! If this piece of idle talk is good for anything it is only as men's admission that power corrupts; because that is the only truth that is proved or illustrated by the fact, if it is a fact, that women are better. And •it may indeed be a fact, because• it is true that servitude, except when it actually brutalises, is less corrupting to the slaves than to the slave-masters. Of these two situations:

- being restrained, perhaps by arbitrary power,
- being allowed to exercise arbitrary power without restraint,

it is the former that is more wholesome for one's moral nature. Far fewer women than men commit crimes, it is said, and no doubt far fewer slaves than free men do so. Those who are under the control of others cannot often commit crimes, unless commanded by their masters and serving their purposes. The world, including the herd of studious men, blindly ignore and pass over all the influences of social circumstances; and I don't know of any more blatant

example of this than men's silly. . . .hymns of praise to the moral, nature of women.

The complimentary dictum about women's moral superiority might be paired off with the disparaging one about their greater liability to moral bias. Women, we are told, can't resist their personal partialities: their judgment in serious affairs is warped by their sympathies and antipathies. Even if this is so, it is still to be proved that women are oftener *misled* by their personal •feelings than men are by their personal •interests. The chief difference *there* seems be that men are led from the course of duty and public interest by their concern for •themselves, whereas women (not being allowed to have private interests of their own) are led astray by their regard for *somebody else*. Bear in mind also that all the education that women get from society •instills in them the feeling that the only duty of care that they owe is to individuals who are •personally• connected with them, and •doesn't introduce them to the ideas—even the elementary ideas—that are involved in any intelligent concern for larger interests or higher moral objects. The complaint against them resolves itself merely into this, that they fulfill only too faithfully the only duty they are taught, which is also almost the only one that they are allowed to practise.

When the privileged make any concession to the unprivileged, it is nearly always because the unprivileged have had the power to extort those changes. This is so much so that no arguments against the subjection of women are likely to be attended to by people in general as long as they can tell themselves that 'women don't complain of it'. [See also the section starting on page 8.] That fact certainly enables men to retain their unjust privilege some time longer, but it doesn't make it less unjust. . . . Actually, women *do* complain of the general lot of women; plaintive elegies on that are very common in the writings of women, and were still more

so back when the lamentations couldn't be suspected of having any practical objective. ·But· their complaints are like men's complaints about the general unsatisfactoriness of human life; they aren't meant to imply blame or to plead for change. But though women don't complain about the power of husbands, each complains about her own husband, or the husbands of her friends. It is the same in all other cases of servitude, at least at the start of the movement towards liberation. The serfs at first complained not about the power of their lords but only about their tyranny. The commoners began by claiming a few municipal privileges; then they asked to be freed from being taxed without their

own consent; but they would have thought it very presumptuous [= 'thoroughly] out of line' to claim any share in the king's sovereign authority. The only rebellion against established rules that is viewed in that way today is that of women against their subjection. A woman who joins in any movement that her husband disapproves, makes herself a martyr, without even being able to be an apostle, for the husband can legally put a stop to her apostleship. Women can't be expected to devote themselves to the emancipation of women until considerable numbers of men are prepared to join with them in the undertaking.



## 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.