

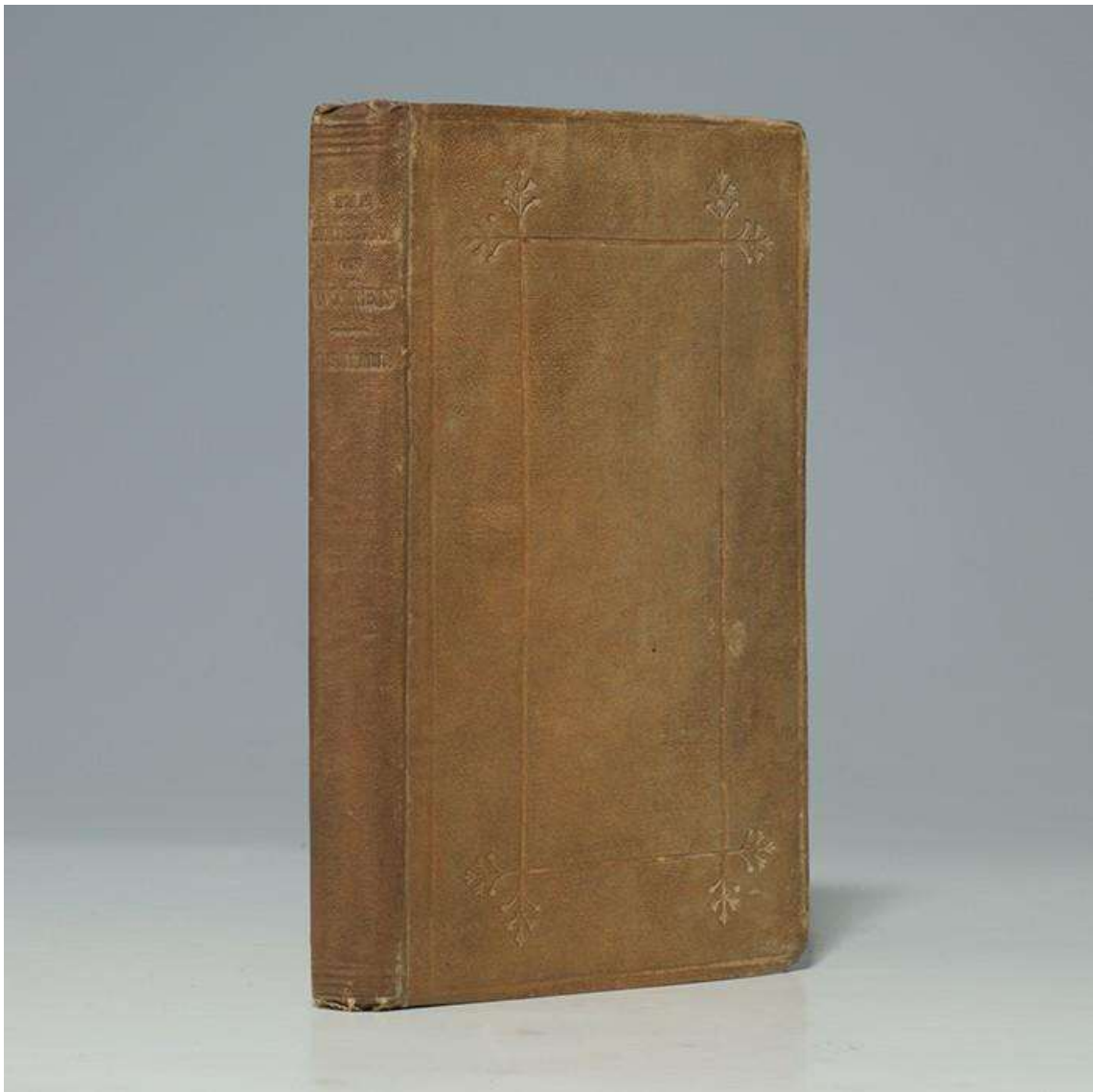
"The Subjection of Women" (1869) by John Stuart Mill

Curated by Stephen A Batman

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Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

John Stuart Mill, The Subjection of Women, 1869



THE
SUBJECTION

OF

WOMEN

BY

JOHN STUART MILL

LONDON
LONGMANS, GREEN, READER, AND DYER
1869

"THE INEQUALITY OF RIGHTS BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN HAS NO OTHER SOURCE THAN THE LAW OF THE STRONGEST": IMPORTANT FIRST EDITION OF MILL'S GROUNDBREAKING WORK, *THE SUBJECTION OF WOMEN*, 1869

First edition, rare publisher's presentation copy, of Mill's classic statement defining and defending the rights of women, a handsome copy in original cloth.

"Many of Mill's ideas are now the commonplaces of democracy. His arguments for freedom of every kind of thought or speech have never been improved on" (PMM 345).

Mill's wife, Harriet Taylor, proved especially influential in developing this work; her 1851 essay on the enfranchisement of women directly inspired it.

"During the seven years of his married life Mill published less than in any other period of his career, but four of his most closely reasoned and characteristic works, *Liberty*, the *Utilitarianism*, the *Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform* and the *Subjection of Women*... were thought out and partly written in collaboration with his wife" (*Britannica*).

"No one had a more rooted hatred for all oppression [illustrated by] his advocacy of the equality of the sexes" (DNB).

Mill served as one of the founders of the first women's suffrage society, which developed into the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, and he presented the first petition on the subject to Parliament.

Title page with embossed stamp, "Presented by the Publisher." Bookseller ticket.

MILL, John Stuart. *The Subjection of Women*. London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1869. Octavo, original light orange cloth. Housed in a custom clamshell box.

Text fine, rubbing and mild soiling to cloth. Desirable in unrestored original cloth.

Introduction

"The Subjection of Women" is a groundbreaking essay published in 1869 by English philosopher, political economist, and civil servant John Stuart Mill. Though Mill is listed as the sole author, the work represents a collaborative intellectual effort with his wife, Harriet Taylor Mill, who significantly influenced its content before her death in 1858, and his stepdaughter Helen Taylor, who contributed important ideas and passages to the final manuscript¹. The essay presents a forceful argument against the patriarchal society of Victorian England and advocates for gender equality at a time when such views were considered radical and controversial⁵.

The cultural and political climate surrounding the publication of "The Subjection of Women" was one of rigid gender roles and severe inequality. In Victorian England, women were generally subject to the whims of their husbands or fathers, with social norms dictating that women were both physically and mentally inferior to men and therefore needed to be "taken care of"¹.

Women had few legal rights, could not vote, had limited access to education and employment, and upon marriage lost control of their property⁴. This oppressive environment was supported by hierarchical religious views and biological determinism that reinforced the archetype of the ideal woman as mother, wife, and homemaker¹.

Mill's motivation for writing this essay was deeply connected to his liberal philosophical principles and his personal experiences. He was convinced that the moral and intellectual advancement of humankind would result in greater happiness for everybody, and he saw the subjection of women as a significant hindrance to human improvement¹. As a member of Parliament, Mill frequently used his position to demand voting rights for women, which was a controversial stance for the time¹. The essay was published during a period when the suffragist movement was gaining momentum and Mill himself was one of the founders of the Women's Suffrage Society². His work served as a vehicle to promote ideas in support of this movement at a time when it was beginning to receive more favorable responses².

The Author

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was an English philosopher, political economist, and civil servant who became one of the most influential thinkers of the 19th century. Known for his advocacy of utilitarianism and liberalism, Mill was a champion of individual liberty and a passionate advocate for social and political reform. Unlike many liberal philosophers of the Victorian Era, Mill's vision of liberalism extended to the rights of women, making him a pioneer in the fight for gender equality⁴.

Mill's intellectual development was shaped by an unusual education under the strict guidance of his father, James Mill, and the philosopher Jeremy Bentham. This rigorous upbringing instilled in him a deep commitment to rational thinking and social progress. Throughout his life, Mill was convinced that the moral and intellectual advancement of humanity would lead to greater happiness for all, and he believed that higher intellectual pleasures yielded far greater happiness than sensual pleasures¹.

Mill's personal life significantly influenced his views on gender equality. His relationship with Harriet Taylor, whom he met in 1830 and married in 1851 after the death of her first husband, was pivotal in shaping his feminist philosophy³. Their relationship was characterized by intellectual partnership and mutual respect, standing in stark contrast to the conventional marriages of their time. Through his relationship with Harriet, Mill explored the situations in which intelligent women were confined by patriarchal institutions and customs that denied their individuality⁷.

In his autobiography, Mill openly acknowledged Harriet's substantial contribution to his work, stating that "all that is most striking and profound in what was written by me belongs to my wife"¹. After Harriet's death in 1858, her daughter Helen Taylor continued to support Mill's work, helping him complete "The Subjection of Women"². This collaborative approach to intellectual work reflected Mill's belief in the equal intellectual capabilities of women and men.

Beyond his philosophical writings, Mill was also a political figure who served as a Member of Parliament from 1865 to 1868. During his time in Parliament, he was a vocal advocate for women's suffrage and other liberal reforms¹. In 1867, he initiated the first major debate on women's right to vote in the House of Commons, demonstrating his commitment to translating his philosophical principles into practical political action⁶.

Why this is a Canonical Book

"The Subjection of Women" must be included in the canon of books containing major ideas that reflect elements of America's politics, governance, economics, and culture for several compelling reasons. First and foremost, the essay presents a powerful philosophical foundation for gender equality that has profoundly influenced American feminist thought and the women's rights movement. Mill's arguments challenging the notion that women are naturally inferior to men and asserting that such beliefs are arbitrary social constructs rather than rational or scientific facts have been instrumental in shaping American discourse on gender equality⁵.

The essay's emphasis on individual liberty and equal opportunity regardless of gender aligns perfectly with core American values. Mill's contention that talent and merit, rather than gender, should be the criteria for determining a person's worth and potential resonates with America's meritocratic ideals⁵. His utilitarian argument that society as a whole suffers when it deprives itself of women's potential contributions to various fields has informed American approaches to education, employment, and political participation⁵.

Mill's critique of marriage laws and his advocacy for women's property rights directly influenced legal reforms in the United States. His comparison of women's status in marriage to slavery struck a particularly powerful chord in post-Civil War America, where the language and moral framework of anti-slavery arguments were being applied to other forms of subjugation¹⁴. The essay's arguments for women's suffrage provided intellectual ammunition for the American suffrage movement, which ultimately succeeded with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

Furthermore, Mill's work represents an early example of a male ally using his privilege and platform to advocate for women's rights, a model that has been important in American social justice movements. His willingness to challenge prevailing societal norms and face criticism for his views exemplifies the American tradition of principled dissent in pursuit of a more just society².

Finally, "The Subjection of Women" continues to be relevant to contemporary American debates about gender equality in the workplace, political representation, and domestic life. The essay's insights into how social conditioning and legal structures perpetuate inequality remain pertinent to ongoing efforts to achieve full equality for women in American society. Its enduring influence on American political and social thought makes it an essential component of the canon of books that have shaped American governance and culture.

Five Timeless Quotes

1. "The legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power and privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other."[5](#)

This foundational quote from Mill encapsulates the central thesis of his essay and remains remarkably relevant today. Mill's assertion that gender inequality is not merely unjust to women but a hindrance to human progress as a whole offers a powerful framework for understanding how gender equality benefits society at large. In our current times, this perspective informs discussions about workplace diversity, political representation, and educational access. Research consistently shows that organizations and societies that embrace gender equality tend to be more innovative, productive, and stable. Mill's insight that equality is not just a moral imperative but a practical necessity for societal advancement continues to drive policy reforms and cultural shifts toward greater gender equality.

2. "Under whatever conditions, and within whatever limits, men are admitted to the suffrage, there is not a shadow of justification for not admitting women under the same."[1](#)

This quote articulates Mill's logical argument for women's suffrage, highlighting the arbitrary nature of gender-based exclusion from political participation. Today, while women in most countries have gained the right to vote, this principle extends to broader questions of political representation and leadership. Despite constituting roughly half the population, women remain underrepresented in legislative bodies, executive positions, and judicial appointments in many countries, including the United States. Mill's straightforward assertion of equal political rights continues to challenge us to examine and address the barriers that prevent women from participating fully in governance and decision-making processes.

3. "The moral regeneration of mankind will only really commence, when the most fundamental of the social relations is placed under the rule of equal justice, and when human beings learn to cultivate their strongest sympathy with an equal in rights and in cultivation."[5](#)

This profound statement connects gender equality to broader moral and social progress. Mill suggests that true moral advancement requires recognizing the fundamental equality of all people, beginning with the relationship between men and women. In contemporary society, this insight applies to efforts to build more equitable relationships, families, and communities. It reminds us that achieving gender equality is not just about changing laws or policies but about transforming how we relate to one another on a fundamental level. This perspective informs current approaches to education, conflict resolution, and community building that emphasize empathy, mutual respect, and recognition of shared humanity.

4. "What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing—the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others."[5](#)

Mill's insight about the social construction of gender remains remarkably prescient. He recognized that what society attributes to women's "nature" is largely the product of socialization and restricted opportunities. This understanding continues to inform contemporary discussions about gender roles, stereotypes, and expectations. In fields ranging from education to marketing to workplace policy, there is growing recognition of how social conditioning shapes gender expression and limits individual potential. Mill's perspective challenges us to distinguish between biological differences and socially constructed limitations, encouraging approaches that allow individuals to develop according to their unique talents and interests rather than prescribed gender roles.

5. "The benefit to the common weal of having women instead of men for the moral and sentient element in the possession of power, would be that women's influence would then be sure to be thrown against war."[5](#)

This quote reflects Mill's belief in women's distinctive moral contributions to society, particularly in opposing violence and war. While contemporary perspectives might critique the essentialist assumptions underlying this view, the broader point about the value of diverse perspectives in decision-making remains valid. Research shows that diverse leadership teams make better decisions and that countries with higher proportions of women in government tend to invest more in health, education, and social welfare. Mill's insight about the importance of including women's perspectives in governance continues to inform efforts to achieve gender balance in leadership positions across sectors, recognizing that diverse viewpoints lead to more comprehensive and effective approaches to complex social problems.

Five Major Ideas

1. Perfect Equality as a Principle

Mill's concept of "perfect equality" represents a cornerstone of his feminist philosophy. He argues that the legal subordination of women to men is inherently wrong and serves as one of the chief obstacles to human improvement[1](#). For Mill, perfect equality means that neither men nor women should face legal suppression or discrimination based on their gender[4](#). This principle extends beyond mere legal rights to encompass equal opportunities in education, employment, and political participation. Mill contends that society should judge individuals based on their talents and merits rather than their gender[5](#). This radical idea challenged the prevailing Victorian belief in separate spheres for men and women and laid the groundwork for modern conceptions of gender equality. Mill's vision of equality was not about erasing differences between men and women but about removing arbitrary barriers that prevented individuals from developing their full potential.

2. Marriage as Partnership Rather Than Subjection

Mill offers a scathing critique of traditional marriage in Victorian society, likening it to a form of slavery for women[14](#). He points out that upon marriage, women lost their property rights and became financially dependent on their husbands, effectively becoming "the actual bondservant of her husband: no less so, as far as legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so called"[7](#). Mill

argues that this unequal arrangement is detrimental not only to women but also to men and society as a whole. He envisions marriage as a partnership based on mutual respect, cooperation, and equality rather than dominance and submission⁷. This vision includes legal reforms to allow women to retain their property after marriage and to have greater autonomy within the marital relationship. Mill's ideal of marital friendship would extend beyond the private sphere to influence public life, as equality within marriage would change societal views on equality more broadly⁷. This perspective continues to inform modern discussions about healthy relationships and the legal frameworks governing marriage.

3. The Social Construction of Gender Differences

Mill challenges the prevailing belief that women's subordinate position in society reflects their natural inferiority to men. Instead, he argues that perceived differences between men and women are largely the result of social conditioning and restricted opportunities rather than inherent biological differences⁵. He points out that society has never allowed women to develop their full potential, making it impossible to know what they might achieve if given equal chances⁹. Mill contends that the "nature of women" as understood in his time was "an eminently artificial thing—the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others"⁵. This insight anticipates modern feminist and sociological understandings of gender as socially constructed. By challenging biological determinism, Mill opened the door to questioning other aspects of gender roles and expectations that were presented as "natural" but were in fact the product of specific social and historical circumstances.

4. Women's Equality as Essential for Social Progress

Mill argues that the subjection of women hinders not only individual women but also the advancement of society as a whole. He contends that by denying women equal rights and opportunities, society deprives itself of the contributions that half of the population could make to various fields⁵⁷. Mill sees women's emancipation as necessary for the development of their personal talents and happiness, which would in turn contribute to the progress of society⁷. This utilitarian argument frames gender equality not just as a matter of justice for women but as beneficial for everyone. Mill suggests that increased competition resulting from women's participation would have "an advantageous effect on human moral and intellectual development, both individual and social"⁷. This perspective continues to inform contemporary arguments for gender equality in education, employment, and leadership, emphasizing the societal benefits of tapping into the full range of human talent and potential.

5. The Role of Legal Reform and Social Change

Mill recognizes that achieving gender equality requires both legal reforms and changes in social attitudes. He advocates for specific legal changes, including women's suffrage, property rights for married women, access to education, and the freedom to pursue professions beyond marriage⁶. However, he also understands that laws alone cannot transform deeply entrenched gender hierarchies. Mill argues that ending women's subjection requires shifts in public opinion, social education, and family dynamics⁶. He strategically appeals to the more liberally-minded within the ruling class to overcome resistance to his ideas². This dual focus on institutional

reform and cultural change reflects Mill's understanding of the complex interplay between laws and social norms in perpetuating or challenging inequality. His approach continues to inform contemporary feminist strategies that address both formal discrimination in laws and policies and informal discrimination in attitudes, expectations, and practices.

Three Major Controversies

1. Radical Challenge to Victorian Gender Norms

"The Subjection of Women" sparked intense controversy upon its publication because it directly challenged the fundamental gender norms of Victorian society. Mill's assertion that women should have equal rights in marriage, education, employment, and political participation was considered extremely radical for his time². The essay received more negative reactions than any of his other writings, with James Fitzjames Stephen, a leading jurist, stating that he disagreed with it "from the first sentence to the last"⁶. Many popular magazines gave the essay negative reviews, and it was the only publication that caused Mill's publisher to lose money⁶. The controversy stemmed from the essay's frontal assault on the prevailing ideology of separate spheres, which held that men and women had naturally different roles and capabilities, with women being suited for domestic life and men for public affairs. By arguing that these differences were socially constructed rather than natural, Mill undermined a cornerstone of Victorian social organization. His comparison of marriage to slavery was particularly provocative, as it cast the most revered Victorian institution in a deeply negative light⁴. This controversy reflects the profound discomfort that Mill's ideas caused in a society structured around rigid gender hierarchies and reveals the extent to which gender equality was viewed as a threat to the social order.

2. Inconsistency Between Radical Theory and Practical Recommendations

Modern critics have identified a tension within "The Subjection of Women" between Mill's radical theoretical framework and his more moderate practical recommendations. Scholars point out an inconsistency between the first two chapters, which present a strong critique of women's subjection, and the last two chapters, which offer more conservative proposals for change⁶. Some critics argue that Mill was insufficiently radical in addressing structural inequalities, particularly regarding the division of labor in homes⁶. They suggest that he was overly optimistic in assuming that most women would choose to be wives as their primary role even if given other options⁶. This controversy highlights the challenge of translating radical theory into practical politics, especially in a highly conservative context. Some Mill scholars defend him by noting the political purpose of the essay, suggesting that he may have tempered his more radical views to protect the emerging women's rights movement and to appeal to those who had rejected his proposal for women's suffrage in Parliament⁶. This debate raises important questions about political strategy and compromise in advancing social change, issues that continue to challenge feminist and other social justice movements today.

3. Tensions Between Liberal Individualism and Recognition of Structural Oppression

Mill's approach to women's equality reflects his liberal philosophical framework, which emphasizes individual rights and freedoms. While this perspective was revolutionary in extending liberal principles to women, some critics argue that it fails to fully address the structural and systemic nature of gender oppression. Mill focuses primarily on removing legal barriers to women's equality, with the expectation that once these barriers are removed, women will be able to compete equally with men⁷. However, this approach may underestimate the depth and persistence of social conditioning, economic disparities, and informal discrimination that continue to disadvantage women even in the absence of legal discrimination. This controversy reflects broader tensions within feminist thought between liberal feminism, which emphasizes equal rights and opportunities within existing systems, and more radical approaches that call for fundamental transformation of social, economic, and political structures. Mill's work anticipates this tension, as he recognizes both the importance of legal reform and the need for changes in social attitudes and practices⁶. The ongoing debate about the adequacy of liberal approaches to gender equality highlights the complexity of addressing deeply embedded forms of oppression and the continuing relevance of Mill's insights as well as the limitations of his framework.

In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read "The Subjection of Women" because it offers a profound and enduring analysis of gender inequality that continues to illuminate contemporary challenges to full equality. Despite being written over 150 years ago, Mill's arguments remain remarkably relevant to ongoing debates about gender roles, equal opportunity, and the relationship between legal rights and social attitudes. The essay provides historical perspective on the long struggle for women's rights, helping readers understand both how far we have come and how much work remains to be done.

For Americans committed to the ideals of liberty and equality, Mill's work demonstrates how these principles must be consistently applied to all people regardless of gender. His utilitarian argument that society as a whole benefits when women are allowed to develop their full potential offers a compelling case for gender equality that goes beyond appeals to abstract justice. This perspective can help bridge ideological divides by focusing on the practical benefits of equality for families, communities, and the nation.

Mill's analysis of how social conditioning shapes our understanding of gender differences provides valuable tools for recognizing and challenging contemporary gender stereotypes and biases. His insights into the relationship between marriage laws and women's broader social status help illuminate how personal relationships and public institutions are interconnected, a perspective that remains essential for addressing systemic inequality.

Furthermore, "The Subjection of Women" exemplifies the power of reasoned argument and moral persuasion in advancing social change. Mill's willingness to take an unpopular stand and make a case for equality in the face of widespread opposition models the kind of principled leadership that democracy requires. His strategic approach to advocating for radical ideas within

existing political structures offers lessons for contemporary change-makers working within American democratic institutions.

Finally, reading Mill's essay helps Americans connect to a broader intellectual tradition of liberal thought that has profoundly shaped American political culture. Understanding this tradition allows citizens to engage more deeply with current debates about equality, liberty, and justice, and to contribute more effectively to the ongoing project of creating a more perfect union. In a time of polarized discourse about gender issues, Mill's reasoned, principled approach to advocating for equality provides a valuable model for civic engagement that respects both tradition and progress.

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